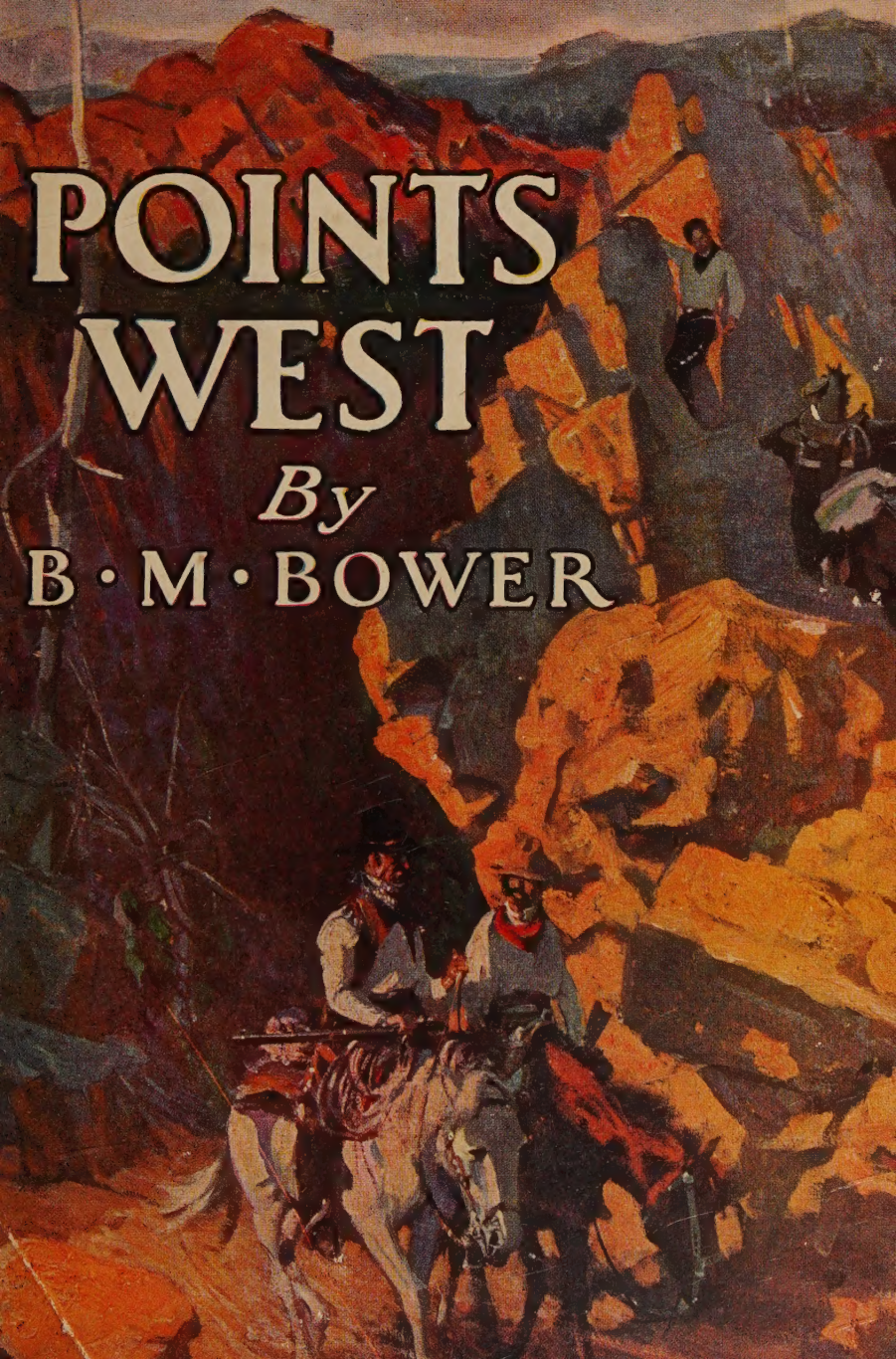
POINTS WEST

By

B·M·BOWER



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POINTS WEST

By B. M. BOWER

Cole Lawson's father was found shot and the verdict was suicide prompted by the collapse of his fortune. The youngster, barely out of his teens, was hurt to the quick. His one idea was to hide himself where his name was unknown. Starting out across the "Bad Lands" with his string of horses he soon found misfortune not so easily avoided. Trouble, unhappiness, and finally grave danger confronted him. It was while helping a mother and daughter on the Harris ranch that he learns some facts that lead to startling conclusions. His latent manhood rebelled at flight and he turned about to challenge Fate and fight for his honor and his rights.

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LOOK ON THE REVERSE SIDE OF THIS JACKET

POINTS WEST

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BY

B. M. BOWER

AUTHOR OF
CHIP OF THE FLYING U,
THE BELLEHELEN MINE,
WHITE WOLVES, ETC.

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POINTS WEST

CHAPTER ONE

BED ROCK AND UNDER

THE sheriff's right leg swung a leisurely arc over the wild-rose pattern stamped on the cantle of his saddle and dropped to the iron stirrup that dangled stiffly below the level of his horse's belly. The sheriff was a tall man, with wide shoulders and narrow hips, and blue eyes that sparkled rather startlingly in his leather-brown face. As his boot clicked into place, the horse moved forward, following the other riders and the herd, but the sheriff reined him back to the youth who stood leaning against the corral post, staring with expressionless face after the retreating group.

"Got any plans, Cole?" Then he hesitated. Sympathy is often a more ticklish sentiment to handle than is blame, and the sheriff found himself groping for words. "You don't want to take it to heart, kid; about the propitty, I mean. I'm goin' to get all I can outa the stock, and what's left over and above the debts, of course ——"

"To hell with the stock!"

"Yeah, well, that's all right too. But it don't get yuh nowhere, kid. What I was goin' to say is, if you should want a job, why ——"

"If I want a job I'll get it away from here."

The sheriff carefully selected a cigarette from the carton they were sold in; a "tailor-made," because rolling your own takes time when a man may not have it to spare from his business. While he drew his thumb nail across a match he eyed the young man covertly from under bushy eyebrows. The kid was taking it hard — which was to be expected — but it was a hardness that might lead him into trouble. The right word — but who can say just what is the right word to speak when youth stands in dazed, impotent fury while his world crashes around him?

"Look here, Cole. Don't get the idea that bad luck is a disgrace you've got to run away from. Your dad's layin' under-ground because he made that blunder and there wasn't nobody there to stop him. What if the market did go down just when he figured it would go up, and he loaded up with stock there wasn't no sale for? Hell, any man's liable to guess wrong! What if the banks did close

in on him? He ain't the first feller that's been crowded to the wall. Most of 'em, kid, are able to start right at bed rock and make a comeback they can brag about afterwards. I ain't sayin' a word against your dad. He was a fine man, and what he done was on the spur of the moment before he had time to think it over. But don't *you* go and let your pride ——"

"Pride!" Cole looked up at him then and grinned with his teeth clamped together and that same impotent fury in his eyes. "I've got a lot to be proud of, I must say! Don't you worry none about my *pride,* Mr. Carroll. That's been tramped into the ground for keeps! My pride — oh, damn the world and everything in it! All I ask of it is to leave me alone."

"And that's meant for me, I reckon. Well, have it your own way — you will anyhow. As I was saying, I'll get all I can outa the stock, and turn over what's left to you. And if you want a job you better get it with some of the outfits where you're known. You'll get a better break here than you will among strangers, kid. You never had to work for wages, and it's liable to come hard till you get used

to it. You've got quite a little string of horses of your own — want to sell any of 'em, Cole?"

"No."

"Well, they ain't a vast herd, but it's better than being down to your bed roll and that wore out. Better come along in with me till I see what I can save outa the wreck for yuh."

"Thanks, no. I'm heading in the other direction."

"Any idee where?"

"To the devil, maybe."

"Wel-l, they say he works his men pretty hard, and he's damn poor pay. But I wish yuh luck, kid, and I hope ——"

Whatever he hoped, the sheriff thought better of mentioning it and tilted his spurs against the smooth coat of the sorrel as a signal to be moving. He flung up a hand in wordless adieu and rode off after his men without once looking back. For when all was said that could be said, Cole Lawson, Junior, would have to live his life in his own way and solve his problems for himself.

With his teeth still clamped together so hard that afterward he found his jaws aching, Cole watched the receding dust cloud that hid

the last of the Lawson herds. The cattle had gone on foreclosure of the bank when the ranch mortgage fell due, and that was the day before Cole Lawson, Senior, had taken the muzzle of his six-shooter between his teeth and pulled the trigger. Pride, the sheriff had called that impulse. Maybe it was; who knows?

"Thank the Lord Mother died before everything went to hell," Cole found himself saying aloud, and bit his underlip painfully when he realized where that thought would lead him. At any rate it was better than having to see her suffer for his father's last, mad impulse. An upward tilt of the old six-shooter, a crook of the trigger finger — so slight an effort as that, and the brain that had planned and schemed and loved and hated became scattered, spongy stuff.

And one was life, and that other, ugly thing was death! And the wealth that had been his — what was that, save words written upon paper? Thousands of cattle branded with the C Bar L — that had been wealth for Cole Lawson and his son and sole heir. Well, the cattle had not died; they still fed contentedly on the range that had always been

their home, but they were not Lawson cattle now. Certain words written on a sheet of foolscap had changed all that, just as certain words on another piece of paper had taken the Lawson lands and given them to a bank.

"Bed rock and under!" Cole said to himself with a bitter twist of his lips. "They think I'm licked. They — hell, the whole darn bunch is *sorry* for me! Heir of the C Bar L — son of a suicide and heir to the disgrace of a quitter!"

He pulled his hot, rebellious stare away from the dust cloud now shrinking to the level of the ridge over which the last of the Lawson stock had been driven, and turned a long, calculating look upon the rambling old house where he had been born. The place looked as strange and unfamiliar to him now as though he had never seen it before in his life. Empty; a mere thing of boards and glass, half hidden under vines that were trying to conceal the stark desolation of the place. And that was the result of words written on a sheet of paper, and of a lump of lead no bigger than the end of his finger. His eyes narrowed appraisingly as he stared and wondered why it was that he felt so much a stranger here

now, when a few days ago the place had been so deeply embedded in his thoughts and his plans that he had never dreamed of living his life apart from the C Bar L. Why, even a week ago he had taken it for granted that they were rich, and that his father would grow old in the customary activities of a prosperous cattleman. Boxed and buried in commiserating silence — even now Cole could not quite sense the enormity of the catastrophe that had come to his father.

A reckless impulse seized him to mount his horse and ride away with the clothes he stood in and what loose silver was in his pocket, but his practical common sense forbade that gesture of childish defiance of fate. Instead he walked deliberately to the empty house, entered rooms that had never before echoed so hollowly to his tread, and began to pack his most cherished — and portable — possessions. A stranger might have smiled at some of the things Cole considered of value: a quilt which his mother had pieced together from scraps of her own dresses and aprons, each one of which Cole remembered poignantly, though many of them had been worn years ago when he was a little boy who loved to sit

in her lap and be rocked; a guitar, small and cheap but nevertheless prized because it was her gift, proudly presented to him on his twelfth birthday; a few books which she had also given him, and finally a buckskin bag of gold coins.

This, too, was the gift of his mother. A bag with his initials worked in beads on one side. On his fifteenth birthday it had been laid beside his plate at breakfast, with a ten-dollar gold piece inside, stamped with the year of his birth. She had laughed and said that it was the beginning of a nest egg which she expected him to save. The idea had pleased Cole, and he had declared that he would save a piece of gold money for every year of his life, and have the dates to match. Well, he had stuck to that notion closer than he had to some others, and while his mother lived she had helped and encouraged him in making the collection complete. Now he weighed the bag in his hands and thought of the gold as money that could be spent if ever he were pushed to that desperate point. A tragic awakening for the son of Lawson the cattle king, who was reputed to be well on his way to a quarter of a million in horses, cattle and land!

These things he packed in a weather-proof, sole-leather bag made to order after the pattern of a mail sack that could be strapped around the top and padlocked. He left the house then and carried the bag to the corral, where he saddled Johnnie, his own pet saddle horse. He considered that he was entitled to a roll of bedding, a small tepee tent and what food he would need for his journey into the unknown world where lay his future, and these things he assembled quickly, in haste to be gone from the place before sundown.

Such was the precision of his movements that the sheriff and his men had not driven the last of the C Bar L horse herd five miles down the trail before Cole himself was mounted and taking the less used trail to the eastward, two lightly packed saddle horses and the three-year-old colt, Hawk, following trustfully behind Johnnie. Cole did not know where he was going nor what he would do when he got there. He did not care. All he wanted was to put the C Bar L and its tragic downfall behind him, to outride the sympathy of those who had witnessed the crash, and to find some isolated neighborhood where he could look into men's eyes and read there no compassionate knowledge of his hurt.

CHAPTER TWO

TO OUTRIDE TROUBLE

MANY a man has attempted to outride his troubles, and few have ever succeeded; but who has ever yet been able to outstrip his own thoughts and the ruthless memory that calls others trooping up to harry the fugitive?

In those first few days of flight Cole Lawson would have been no more miserable had he stayed on the ranch or ridden in with the sheriff, as he had been invited to do. He was trying, for one thing, to outride the memory of that horrible minute when he had stood aghast beside the still quivering body of his father. Cole had loved his dad in an inarticulate, shy way that never found open expression. He had never suspected him of being in any deep trouble, and he could not account for the instant chill of apprehension which flashed over him when he had heard the shot in the room his father had used for an office. Gunshots were not so infrequent on the ranch, where target shooting was a popular sport and there were always hawks sailing

up in the hope of pouncing upon a chicken and making off undetected. His father always had an eye out for these pests and never failed to send a shot after any hawk he discovered within range. Yet this particular report had sent Cole racing to the house with his heart pounding heavily in his throat, and so he would carry a gruesome picture indelibly painted in his mind; and ride as he would it flashed before him at unexpected moments when he thought he was thinking of something altogether different.

He rode out of the Black Rim country by way of Thunder Pass which sloped steeply up between Gospel Peak and Sheepeater Mountain, and so came down the steep trail into Burroback Valley which seemed remote, sufficient unto itself, a world apart from the range land across the mountains. Cole had heard rumors of Burroback country. It was said to be tough. But then, Black Rim county was no saints' rest, so far as that went, and the toughness did not trouble him in the least, save that it put him a bit on guard.

Burroback Valley was long and deep, with a creek running the entire length of it and many little gulches and canyons twisting back

into the hills so that a map of it in detail would somewhat resemble the back and ribs of a great fish. The nearest railroad was miles away, and it seemed to Cole that he might safely ride up to some ranch and ask for work.

The place he chanced upon first was the Muleshoe, a bachelor establishment which lay just down the valley from Thunder Pass and seemed to hug close to the ribbed side of Gospel Mountain. A secluded looking ranch which looked as though it held itself purposely aloof from the rest of the world; sinister too, if a man were old enough and experienced enough to read the signs. But Cole was neither, and the entire absence of normal activity around the squalid ranch buildings served only to impress him further with the idea that here would be a sanctuary from his tragic past. Folks wouldn't know anything about what happened outside the valley, and would care less.

A hard-faced, shifty-eyed man with a high beak of a nose came forward to the gate, as Cole rode up, and leaned over it with his arms folded upon the top rail, one hand drooping significantly toward his left side where the brown butt of a .45 stood loosely in its holster.

Afterward, Cole heard the owner of the Muleshoe called Bart Nelson, but now in the soft light of the afterglow he never dreamed that so unsavory a character as Bart Nelson confronted him. He had not lived his life among killers, and the sag of Bart's right hand went unnoticed, and he thought the man was squinting against the light of the western sky and so looked at him innocently through half-closed lids.

Cole asked for work bluntly, without preface, because he did not know how to go about it and wanted the distasteful question out and done with.

Bart Nelson studied him, studied the four horses — good-looking mounts they were too — and spat tobacco juice expertly at a white rock near by.

"What you doin' over in Burroback?" he asked in a flat, grating voice. "You're Cole Lawson's kid, I bet. Heard he went broke and blowed his brains out. Tryin' to sneak some horses out away from the sheriff?"

"Why, you go to hell! That's none of your damned business!" Cole retorted with quiet viciousness, and turned Johnnie away from that gate, the other horses swinging to follow

him with the docility which tells of days on the trail together.

Bart Nelson straightened his shoulders and fingered his .45. No man had ever slapped back at him in that fashion and turned his back and ridden off without answer of sharp words or shots. Other Muleshoe men mysteriously appeared and stared after the boy, who never once deigned to look back.

"Now, what d' yuh think of that for gall?" Bart Nelson inquired of no one in particular. "Somethin' behind that play, I betcha." He watched Cole out of sight, his narrowed eyes vigilant.

When nothing developed, the Muleshoe men shook their heads and decided that the kid had been sent to spy around, in hope of not being recognized, but had discovered that they were not such fools after all, and so gave up his plan, whatever it had been. Four C Bar L horses and a look like old Cole Lawson, and he thought he could pass unrecognized! The darned fool; did he think they were blind? They all agreed with Bart that there must be something behind it, and they were all especially wary for several days thereafter.

As we all know, their uneasiness was with-

out cause, for Cole had none of that boldness which his manner indicated. He rode away sick at heart over the unexpected jab at his wound just when he had believed he had outridden all knowledge of it. If his retort to Bart had been brutally direct, he had never been taught to set a guard over his tongue, but had been permitted to say what he thought when he thought it. The men of the C Bar L had always liked him and humored him from the time he could string words together into a sentence, and Cole did not dream that he had spoken to Bart Nelson in a manner that might well have started gun play. The chief thing was that he had been recognized.

Of course it was the brand on his horses that had given him away at the ranch back there. There was nothing about himself or his outfit that would give any one a clue to his identity, and as for his name, he had meant to tell folks it was Colman, and let it go at that. No, it was the C Bar L, and he was a fool for not thinking of that brand as a dead give-away. The C Bar L must be known all over the country, and gossip rides fast, even in this big empty country. Well, he would have to do something about it, he supposed.

As he rode on down the valley, Cole cast frequent dissatisfied glances back at his horses. The pick of the C Bar L horses they were, most of them given to him when they were yearlings, all of them pets which he had broken and taught. One was a two-year-old colt, round-hipped, straight-limbed, giving promise of speed and strength and wind, and a gentle thing with a disposition for nuzzling confidence. Cole thought fleetingly of selling them here in the valley; but that would be useless, and besides, horses weren't worth much nowadays. They were worth so little, in fact, that Cole had turned in a small bunch of horses which he might justly have claimed as his own, to help swell the number for the sale and make certain that the herd would bring enough to cover the debts which had driven his father to take the six-gun route out of the muddle. It was because these four were particular pets that he had kept them. He couldn't sell them now. There was another way.

That night, in a secluded little meadow ringed round with thick bushes and quaking aspen thickets, Cole took that other way of removing the last clue to his past. He built

a little fire, heated a cinch ring in the manner he had heard described by his father's punchers, when they spun tales of the range on winter evenings, and proceeded to wipe out the last clue to his past. One by one he roped and tied down his horses and with the white-hot ring held firmly in the fork of two green willow sticks he marked out the C Bar L with crisscross burns set deep with unconscious savageness. What he wanted was to make that brand forever undecipherable, and he succeeded so well that one would need to skin a horse and look on the wrong side of the hide to tell what the original brand had been.

Several days elapsed before he could bring himself to the ordeal of riding out again to face the world he hated with all the fierceness of unhappy youth. The little glade seemed remote from the business of the valley and his horses fed contentedly there, switching at the flies which buzzed tormentingly around the fresh burns. Cole fished a little, but most of the time he spent lying on the ground under a tree with his hat pulled low over his eyes, thinking round and round in circles which always brought him to the central fact that he was alone in the world and that his life

must start from that secluded little meadow.

It would be life on the range, because he had never learned to do hard manual labor and he had refused to spend the years in school which were necessary if he would get an education; so he was not fitted for the competitive life of the towns, either as an office man or even as a common laborer. He had sense enough to know that, and he had pride enough to want to live where he could hold his own with the best of them. He could ride — the C Bar L maintained that Cole could ride anything that wore hair; he could bounce tin cans off the ground with bullets while he galloped past and shot as he rode, and he had an uncanny skill with a rope. Also, he had four good horses and a deep-rooted love of freedom and the outdoors.

The range, then — or what little of it was left — was his natural field of achievement. As he lay there, he sometimes dreamed of owning a ranch — and you could bet he'd never go in debt for a dime's worth of anything! There was still government land to be taken up, and he was of age. He'd call himself Colman, which was his mother's maiden name, and forget the Lawson. He could file on a home-

stead and work part of the time, say during round-up, and gradually get together a little bunch of stock. By the time he was thirty or so, he ought to be fairly independent.

It was the foundation upon which many a ragged lad has built castles in the air, and in the summer tranquillity of that small meadow Cole sometimes forgot his bitterness long enough to fence and cultivate an imaginary homestead, build cabin and corrals and a stable or two, and watch his small herd of cattle grow to sizable proportions.

But the time came when the bacon and flour ran alarmingly low and Cole could not swallow another trout, especially when he had nothing to fry it in. The blotted brands had reached the stage of scabbing, and would not, he hoped, attract too much attention. So one morning Cole broke camp and moved reluctantly out to the road again, to face the world of which he secretly felt a bit afraid. As the three loose horses took last mouthfuls of grass and trotted after him, Cole twisted his body in the saddle and looked back. The little meadow was sunlit and peaceful. He knew the shape of every tree and bush that rimmed the grassland; the gurgling murmur

of the brook had made words for him as he lay staring down at it where it curled and twisted among the stones. Even the clouds that floated lazily across the opening seemed friendly and familiar. There were the pressed places in the grass where the horses had lain down to sleep, the trampled nook where he had made his camp, the ashes of his small fires.

He hated to leave that meadow which seemed saturated with his thoughts, made homey with his days and nights of eating and sleeping there. But the grass was cropped short and his food pack swung nearly empty — man and horses must eat.

Cole heaved a long sigh and faced about to ride where the trail led him and to meet whatever lay upon it.

CHAPTER THREE

COLE FINDS A JOB

COLE heard one of his horses snort and looked up from turning bacon in the frying pan to see two men seated upon quiet horses in the shadow of the broken ledge of lava beside which he had made camp for the night. Cole lifted the frying pan off the fire to a flat rock close by and stood up, his thumbs hooked inside his belt in the fashion he had learned from certain of the C Bar L riders whom he especially admired for a certain quality of potential deadliness which appealed to him. The men eyed him, eyed the horses with a curious interest, muttered to each other and then started toward him slowly, with an air of caution which might be flattering or menacing, as one chose to interpret their manner.

"I guess there ain't anything much over this way you want," Cole said, when they had ridden ten feet nearer.

The two stopped, and the older of the two ostentatiously clasped his hands over the saddle horn; though that would not have

slowed his reach for the gun stuck inside his chap belt on the left of the lacing, should he feel the need of his gun. He had a long upper lip, and when he smiled his mouth drew down into a pucker which might give one the impression of a dry humor, half reluctant to betray itself just then.

"Don't want to intrude on any one's privacy," he said gently. "We was just ridin' by and seen your smoke. No harm in swingin' this way on the chance of bein' invited to supper — in case it was some friend of ours camped here." He paused to clear his throat with a slight rasping sound, and then added apologetically, "Folks that are shy of meetin' anybody generally pick drier wood for their fire. Got any coffee to spare?"

Cole was on the point of snapping out "No!" But these two looked friendly, and it had been overlong since he had held any friendly conversation with men; talking to your horses will do for a while, but the time comes when one wants to hear new thoughts put into speech. Cole relaxed, stooped and replaced the frying pan on the fire.

"Guess I can split the grub three ways," he said gruffly, and lifted the coffeepot to see

how heavy it was. "You live around here?" He looked up from adding more water and more coffee, and his cool glance went flicking over the two, by no means off his guard because of one humorously suppressed smile.

"Wel-l, hereabouts," the tall man drawled, swinging down from his horse. "You're a stranger in these parts, I guess. Where from?"

"Points west," Cole said briefly. "You'll have to eat with your fingers; I'm travelin' light."

"Fingers was made before forks," the stranger tritely replied, and seated himself with his back to the ledge. His companion got down and eased into place beside him. "We're travelin' kinda light ourselves."

Cole looked at the two, aware of a certain significance in the remark; but the other met his eyes with that same humorous smile drawn into a pucker of the lips. The younger man was staring furtively at Cole's horses, turning his eyes while his face did not move.

"Out huntin' stock, and we didn't expect to get up this far," the man further explained. "These draws and canyons are sure a fright for huntin' strayed stock in."

It was the old excuse, time-honored and always good because it could seldom be refuted. Stock did stray, and men did ride out to find them. Hunting stray horses was a plausible reason for appearing anywhere on the range at any time of the day or night. Cole knew that well enough and he wondered if it happened to be the truth this time; but there was nothing he could say to it, except to agree that the country sure was a fright. He had three cups — or more particularly he had two tin cups and a can — and he filled these with coffee, speared bacon from the frying pan and laid it across thick pieces of pan-baked bread, and told the two that supper was ready. They moved up and sat on their boot heels, eating and drinking with appetite.

"You don't happen to need another man, do you?" Cole asked at last, speaking to the older man with a carefully indifferent manner and tone.

"Well, I could use one — the right kind. Ever hear of John Roper?" He eyed Cole over his cup.

"No. Don't know anybody around here. Just travelin' through; but I wouldn't mind working for a while — right kind of a job."

The other chewed his bannock meditatively, watching the bay horse Johnnie, as he came nosing up for attention from his master. Cole had baked plenty of bannock because it was his habit to feed bits to his horses while he ate; now the horses all came poking along toward the camp fire, snatching at tufts of grass as they walked. Their freshly blotted brands would have caught the attention of the most ignorant tenderfoot. John Roper studied them, turned his eyes speculatively upon Cole.

"Them your horses, the hull four?"

"They're supposed to be," Cole snubbed his inquisitiveness.

Both men grinned involuntarily and sobered again, save that the humorous pucker remained in John Roper's lips.

"Well, I could use a man with a string of saddle horses like them. Seem to be gentle enough; fast too, by the looks of them legs. You can rope, I s'pose — how about shootin'? They's a pretty tough bunch rangin' in these canyons; we all go heeled and ready for a scrap. No use hirin' anybody that's gun-shy or that can't ride."

"I'll chance coming out all right," Cole said grimly and looked over his shoulder at

the horses. "I'll guarantee these four to go anywhere a goat can, and finish at the head of the parade. That," he added for good measure, "is why I've got 'em."

Roper studied him again, peering squint-eyed through the firelight. Perhaps he saw the settled look of misery in the boy's face and mistook it for something less innocent; perhaps he read the moody set of the lips as something evil and hard. At any rate, he glanced sidelong at his companion, who gave a slight nod of approval, and cleared his throat with that dry, rasping sound which was not much more than a whisper of a cough and seemed to be a little mannerism of which he was unconscious; an habitual preliminary to speaking his decision.

"Well, I'll give yuh a job. For a while, anyway, till we finish up a kinda ticklish job we got on hand." He shot a keen glance at Cole who was staring moodily into the fire while he smoked. "Ticklish, because we're dealin' with a tough bunch and we want to handle it quiet as we kin. Got away with a bunch of horses I own, and I got reason to believe the brands has been worked and they're keepin' the horses right in this country. Me

an' Pete has been scoutin' around to see what we could find out about it. What I want is to get 'em back on the quiet, without them knowin' just where they went to. Sabe?"

"I guess so. You're leaving the sheriff out of the deal?"

"Got to, when the sheriff's in cahoots with the gang. No, I want my horses back. May have to steal 'em, but I'll get 'em, if they're still in the country. You game for a little hard ridin' and mebby a little gun play? I don't look for no great trouble; still — standin' in with the sheriff and all, they're purty damn' bold and they might have the gall to fight it out with us; if they git wise to what we're up to, that is. If we work it right, though, we can run off the hull herd right under their noses and not a grain of powder burned. What d'yuh say, Kid?"

Cole got up and gave Johnnie the last piece of bannock before he shooed the horse back to tell the others there was nothing doing in the way of hand-outs to-night. He wanted a little time to think over this matter of the "ticklish" job, and he was too boyishly proud of his courage to let it be seen that he hesitated to accept. There was something about it

which did not sound right — and it was not the element of risk, either. Perhaps it was the bald assertion that the sheriff of this county was conniving with the horse thieves; that did not jibe with all Cole knew of sheriffs, but then he had never known any save the big, bluff, kindly soul who had tried to comfort him when all the world was black. Of course, there were not many like big Ed Yates; dishonest sheriffs did exist, and he had always heard this section spoken of as a black spot on the range. He had ridden this way because it seemed the farthest removed in point of contact — farther than twice the number of miles in any other direction — and because the very toughness of Burroback men held them aloof from the rest of the world and so from gossip. His reasoning had been logical enough, but he had not taken into consideration the fact that the character of these people would be reflected in the work he hoped to find. Still, there was no use in being finicky, and getting stock away from horse thieves promised diversion, at least. And surely it was honest to get your own stock back.

"I'll try it out," he said, turning back to the fire. "It ain't just what I had in mind,

but it's all right till I can pick up a steady job of riding — if I decide to stay in this part of the country. But if I use my own horses, I'll want extra pay, and a six-gun job is worth a lot more than straight riding." He turned upon Roper a steady, impersonal stare which made him seem older and more experienced than he was. "So you may as well understand right now that if I take this job it'll be for the money there is in it, and that I don't give a darn for the risk."

"Suits me," Roper told him dryly. "Money's what we're all after, I guess. Any p'ticular name you want us to call yuh?"

"Yes. It's Colman, and you can call me Cole if you want to. How much do I get extra for furnishing my own mounts? They're dandies, and I'll guarantee them to do all any four horses can do."

"Anything but show a clean brand," the silent Pete spoke up, with an abrupt laugh that carried more meaning than Cole quite realized.

"Say, that brand suits *me* all right."

"You're the one to be suited," Roper pacified, giving Pete a warning glance. "Well, how'd a hundred dollars suit yuh, for this one

job? May last a week, maybe longer; won't be more 'n a month at the outside. We've got to lay our lines careful and watch our chance; no use gettin' in too big a hurry and ballin' it up. Call it a month."

Stifling any surprise he may have felt, Cole said he would take it. The two got up and went to their horses, hovered there talking together in low tones, then Roper turned back for a last word.

"Better break camp and come along with us now," he said, glancing around him. "Might as well git yourself organized with us before anybody else runs across yuh. This is once when it don't pay to advertise. We're goin' on home and you might as well go along."

A reasonable request, thought Cole, and began getting his meager outfit together. He had taken his time that day and the horses were not tired, nor were they especially hungry, since he had camped early and they had been feeding industriously ever since. No, there was no reason why he should not go with Roper; yet reluctance nagged at him, made him potter over the packing. It was as if he were trying to remember something im-

portant which had slipped treacherously from his mental grasp; as if there were some very good reason why he should not go with Roper and Pete, if only he could think what it was.

At the last Pete came up to help him with the pack lashing, his attitude one of impatience. Roper himself seemed uneasy, in a hurry to start.

"We got a long way to go, young feller," he explained his haste. "They's a late moon and we oughta catch it just right fer a bad stretch of trail. These horses of yours — they sure-footed, you say?"

"That's what I said," Cole retorted, disliking the other's persistent way of returning always to the subject of the horses.

"Well, they need to be; we got rough goin', gettin' in from this side the Sinks. Ever been through the Sinks?"

"No. I told you I'm a stranger here."

"Yeah, so you did. Well, it's goin' to be hard work drivin' your loose horses over the trail we'll take. I dunno ——"

"I don't drive them anywhere. They'll follow where I ride." Cole mounted, and the horses came up and stood grouped around him, waiting for the signal.

Roper eyed the bunch, grunted something under his breath and swung in beside Pete. They started down along the ledge to where a broken crevice gave precarious foothold to the top, turned into the fissure and went scrambling up. Loose stones rattled down among the bowlders so that Cole was kept busy dodging them, and Johnnie snorted and would have turned back had there been room enough. But somehow he gained the top and saw where Roper and Pete had swung off sharply to the right and were picking their way single file along the brow of the cliff, their vague forms sometimes lost to sight among the stunted junipers which grew courageously among the rocks, their roots thrust deep within the narrow cracks in the ledge.

All day Cole had kept to the floor of the valley, these broken cliffs and ledges hemming him in and shutting him off from a view of the country beyond. Now the starlight dimly revealed to him a vast broken area that seemed a madman's conception of hell frozen over. Stark black peaks thrust up against the sky to the eastward, but before them lay a tortured land that told of the world's age-long travail of creation, when fire and flood, slow-

creeping fields of glacial ice and sudden blasts of subterranean fires gouged and twisted and thrust forth strange conformations of rock and soil. He wondered if the trail led down into that nightmare country, and while he was speculating upon it his guides turned into a tilted crevasse and went slipping and sliding to the bottom.

Cole spoke encouragingly to Johnnie, glanced back at the three loose horses, mentally measured the width of the pack on Mick's capable back, and followed down that fearful incline. With some secret relief he reached the bottom without mishap, listened a moment for the click of hoofs to the front and went on, for the most part letting Johnnie choose his own path. Once he heard the mumble of voices ahead; again, he caught sight of a man's head and shoulders silhouetted against the sky line as he rode up over a billowy ridge of sandstone. A moment later he heard Roper's voice calling back to ask if he were making it.

"Fine and dandy," Cole replied, and heard Roper's slight laugh much closer than he had expected. Another minute and he saw that the trail doubled sharply back upon itself and

that Roper had ridden almost abreast of him and a little above. Cole pulled up sharply and waited. He did not want any rocks rolling down and crippling Johnnie.

"What yuh stoppin' for?" Roper taunted. "Thought you could ride where a goat can go!"

"Quit kicking rocks down here, then. What you riding, anyway? A snowplow? That skate of yours must be digging his way through this hill!"

Roper did not say anything to that. Evidently he had gone on, for the small avalanche of sand and small rocks ceased. Cole went on, made the turn and went up cautiously, one eye on the loose horses coming along the lower trail. A dangerous place, he decided, and halted the loose horses with a word, making them stand still and wait until he had completed the switchback. Then he waited until they made the turn safely, and went on angling down the ridge after Roper.

After that Cole lost all sense of direction and all sound of his guides, trusting mainly to the keen instinct of his horse to keep him on the trail — if trail there was. The foot of the ridge stood in deep, muffling sand; other

ridges closed in like the crooked fingers of some Gargantuan image of stone, and there was no sign of Roper or Pete to tell which way they had gone. He could have shouted for them, but he would not give them that satisfaction after Roper's taunt. If they wanted him to follow them, they could do the shouting themselves, he thought perversely, and waited in a triangular niche where Johnnie had stopped for the simple reason that he could go no farther forward and had received from his master no hint that he should turn back.

Cole dismounted and felt along the sheer wall with his hands, making sure that there was no outlet save the way he had come. It was dark as a pocket in here among the ledges. Surely Roper must know that a stranger would be utterly confused in such a place. He would come back, of course, when he discovered that Cole was not following him. There was nothing to do but wait, and Cole felt his way past the three trustful animals that had crowded in after Johnnie, reached the sharp turn of the cliff and leaned against it, waiting for some signal from Roper.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SINKS

"HE never come this far, I tell yuh. He was over on the switchback when I dropped him, and he musta kep' on round the ridge."

In the act of licking a cigarette into shape Cole stopped and listened, instinctively wary as a hunted animal. Coming stealthily out of the deep silence as they did, the words carried a certain sinister quality, though of themselves they seemed innocent enough; Roper and Pete, coming back to look for him, just as he had been expecting for the last ten minutes.

"Hell of a note if we miss 'im," Pete's voice growled in a guarded undertone. "Yuh sure he climbed the switchback? You coulda popped 'im then."

"On that cattle trail? Might as well'v done it back there at the camp fire. No, the deeper we git 'im in the Sinks, the better. Hell, I thought you was keepin' cases back there! Didn't I motion yuh to wait till he passed an' then foller 'im? Git 'im between

us, that way. Now, you come moggin' along and yuh don't know where he is!"

"You was closer to 'im than I was, John. You had every chance in the world."

"That's all you know. Better go back and holler for 'im, I guess. This is no place to do it."

Flattened against the rock, Cole held his breath while he listened. The two voices sounded close behind him, but that could not be, since he had been riding along a rock wall for some little distance until Johnnie, still keeping alongside the cliff, had turned into the niche and stopped. Yet he plainly heard the clink of an iron-bound stirrup striking against the rock, and the sigh of a horse as he moved away. Not a dozen feet away it seemed, and Cole slid his hand along the ledge, half expecting to find another corner around which the two might ride in a few seconds.

Instead, his fingers dropped into a narrow crevice through which a cool breeze came drifting. Cole felt farther, found the solid rock again, and saw at once what had happened. Through some freak of chance — or perhaps it was destiny that guided Johnnie's

steps that night — he had come down along one side of a narrow upthrust of rock while the two he had tried to follow rode down the other side. How they had happened to stop and talk beside that crack in the rock, only God could explain. But they did stand at that point to discuss with bloodcurdling matter-of-factness the details of their plan, and Cole was there to hear. Things happen that way sometimes, when there is no other human means of protecting a man.

Cole at that moment did not feel the protection. All his mind could grasp was the fact that Roper and Pete had tricked him into coming down into the Sinks with them so they could kill him without fear of interruption or discovery. Moreover, it was much easier to get him down in here with the promise of a job than it would have been to carry his dead body away without leaving a clue. He had camped too close to the road, and he had been too much on his guard. He remembered now that he had kept the fire between himself and them. They would have been obliged to shoot him, and they evidently feared that some one might be riding that way who would investigate. Down here — if

they got him far enough into this ungodly country — no one would hear a shot; or perhaps they hoped to kill him quietly; Pete had mentioned a rock, Cole remembered.

It was the horses they were after, of course. They had been very much interested in the horses. Probably his clothes and his camp outfit appealed to them also, and the hope of finding money. Cole trembled a little with the excitement of it, but he did not feel afraid now that he knew just what to expect from them. He would be prepared, and he would shoot first.

But there his nerves rebelled. Too lately had he seen just how a dead man looked. No, he could not bring himself to face the thought of killing, however much they deserved it; yet it might come to that, if he wanted to go on living.

"And they had the gall to talk about a tough gang in this valley!" Cole's anger grew apace as he recalled the specious talk of Roper at the camp fire. He had heard the C Bar L riders tell of such human wolves as these, but he had never quite believed that men would kill for the sake of a horse or two, or perhaps a few dollars in money they could

carry away and spend. That had always sounded unreal and overdrawn, as if the boys were just yarning for the effect upon him. Now he was prepared to believe anything he heard about cold-blooded killers.

Standing there beside the crack in the rock wall, Cole considered what he must do to outwit them. In the darkness he could not do much of anything; but then, in the darkness they would not be likely to discover him, either. The trail, he decided, must run along the other side of this outcropping; how far he could not even guess. By daybreak they would probably be able to track him in this loose sand, so whatever he did must be done as soon as possible. And that, he was forced to admit, was nothing at all, save watching and listening for their approach. At least the horses were safe for the present, penned in that niche as they were, and the thought brought Cole some comfort.

How long he stood there Cole could not tell, for he dared not strike a match to look at his watch. He dared not smoke or move about, since sounds carried plainly through that crack and the two might come on up the trail at any moment. Fervently he hoped

that the moon would forget to rise that night; and after a long while, when the east began to lighten a bit, he saw that the sky was becoming overcast with clouds that scudded obliquely across the whitened patch just over a peak. Wind came, but no moon; a slow, sweeping wind that blew strongly and steadily without any violent gusts; such a wind as would have delighted a sailor aboard an old windjammer on the homeward voyage. It delighted Cole no less, for he felt the sand creeping past his legs and knew that it was drifting and would blur his tracks even if it did not obliterate them entirely; so that would give him a fighting chance of escape.

Twice he thought he heard a faint halloo back in the direction from which he had come, but with the wind whistling among the interstices in the ledge he could not be sure. When his legs wearied of standing, he withdrew around the corner of the niche and sat down with his back against the rock. Hawk, the two-year-old, came up and nosed him wistfully, and Cole drew the sleek head down where he could rub the satiny nose and smooth the long forelock, running his fingers absently through the hair to smooth out each tangle.

But though the colt's companionship was gratefully received, he did not forget to listen with strained attention for the approach of Roper and Pete.

Dawn came gray and cloudy, with a high wind which whipped up the sand into stinging swirls that piled small drifts here and there against the rocks. In the open it gouged deep furrows in fantastic patterns and the whooping of the gale made an eerie song among the thin sharp ridges that went twisting this way and that in labyrinthine windings through this particular portion of that strange, forbidding waste land locally called the Sinks.

When daylight was full upon him, Cole saw that the niche into which Johnnie had led him might more properly be called a triangular cleft in the rocks. The horses stood huddled at the far end of it, where the narrowing walls sheltered them from the wind; a circumstance which pleased him so much that he got his rope off the saddle and stretched it across the twenty-foot space, penning them there well out of sight except from the opening itself. Had he been searching for a hiding place this spot would have appealed to him as almost ideal, he thought, as

he surveyed the horses contentedly standing in their little corral, Mick with his chin resting on Johnnie's neck, Hawk crowded in between Eagle and Johnnie, his big dark eyes fixed inquiringly upon Cole. Get those horses? Roper and Pete would have to take them over his dead body, Cole thought rather melodramatically, and took out his six-shooter to examine it and make sure that it was in perfect working condition.

With the horses safe for the present, Cole turned his attention to the wall itself. It struck him that Roper and Pete would be looking for the horses and would never think of watching the top of the ledges, so he pulled off his boots and began climbing the wall on the side next the crack which had proven so useful last night. The rough, splintered face of the rock gave many handholds and as he neared the top the other side of the cleft tilted inward and offered its solid surface as a brace, so that presently he found it very much like climbing up inside an ill-shaped chimney. If it came to a fight, this would be a splendid point from which to defend himself and his horses, he thought, as he stopped to breathe and look down at them. There was one

danger to be guarded against, he remembered. If he got out of sight they would probably whinny after him; certainly Johnnie would lift up his anxious voice, and probably set them all neighing. Eagle in particular had a terrifically high, shrill call. He must bear that in mind and not go too far, lest their very love for him should betray them all.

As it happened, Cole discovered that the ledge narrowed like the peak of a wind-chopped wave and that he could stand waist-deep on a broken splinter of rock within the cleft and look down to the blowing sand on either side.

Eyes watering in the wind, he gazed out over an intricate jumble of narrow winding lanes hemmed in with barren broken hills which seemed to extend in an uneven line to the black peaks in the distance. There must be open stretches, wide spaces here and there, but Cole could see nothing of the sort close by; nothing save the thin ledges thrusting up from the sand, with here and there piles of loose bowlders where some portion of wall had fallen in a heap — shaken down in an earthquake, perhaps.

To find him in that maze would be almost impossible, he decided. Roper and Pete would have no clue to his whereabouts, now that the wind had come and swept out his tracks. They must hunt for him at random, and from where he stood he would see them coming long before they could possibly discover him.

So far was luck on his side. But if they could not discover his hiding place, neither did he know the way back out of the Sinks. Without water, he could stay hidden only so long before his sanctuary became a trap. He had food, but there was nothing for the horses to eat and he would be obliged to chew his bacon raw or do without; a thirst-provoking repast which did not tempt him at all.

He shifted his position to where he could sit on a narrow shelf which projected on the lip of the crack, his legs dangling into the cleft and his back against a slanting slab of stone. There he perched bareheaded in the wind and smoked while he watched the desolate terrain spread raggedly before him. Black rock and yellow, drifting sand with here and there a deformed juniper bush — not an enlivening scene under happier conditions

than these; certainly holding no cheer for him now.

Toward noon ragged rifts tore through the mottled gray blanket of clouds and let a dazzling shaft of sunlight through. The gale still whistled around the rocks it could not shake; the sand still drifted before it and built little furrows and ridges that perhaps would be scooped up bodily and tossed into the air in a cloud with the next erratic gust.

Up on the perch he had chosen above the cleft Cole nodded in spite of himself. Nothing had moved within his range of visions save a flock of buffeted cedar birds that flew over his head, making for the farther hills. Insensibly his vigilance relaxed and he dozed fitfully, his shoulders sagged into a depression of the rock at his back. The whoo-oo of the wind merged into a droning chant, faded to silence as his mind dropped deeper into the velvet darkness of sleep; swelled up again to sound that took the form of words, at first mumbled and meaningless, then clearer and carrying a meaning that tugged at Cole's consciousness until he opened his eyes and blinked guiltily as if he would deny even to himself that he had been asleep.

Roper and Pete were riding down along the wall toward him, side by side with stirrups almost touching, as they swung to the plodding of the tired horses through the sand. Pete was talking, and it was his growling voice that had seemed a part of the wind's monotonous drone.

"You'd oughta got 'im on the switchback. That was a cinch an' you let it slip by," he was saying crabbedly but without any greater animus than the impulse to pass the blame along to the other fellow. "Now we got t' hunt 'im outa here like a rabbit in a rock pile. This damn' wind ——"

"Jim's picked him up with the glasses, maybe. Once we git 'im located, the rest 'll be easy. Quit yer bellyachin', or I'll send yuh on home."

A mirthless grin twisted Cole's lips as he listened. Had these two been quarreling over his disappearance ever since last night? They weren't getting anywhere with the argument, that was certain. Pete must be a privileged character, he thought. As the two rode nearer, and passed so close he could have flipped a pebble on to their hat brims, Cole thought what an easy shot it would be to drop

them both off their horses. An Indian or some harder natured man might have done just that; certainly they would have considered this a heaven-sent opportunity to shoot him down, had their positions been reversed, and Cole scowled at his own softness because he could not kill them for the human wolves their own mouths proclaimed them to be.

Instead he stiffened to the immobility of the rock behind him, just as old Billy Parrish, his father's foreman, had long ago taught him to do on the hunting trails when game stepped out in plain sight. Not even the horses, walking with drooped heads swinging to each stride they took, flipped an ear his way to show that they suspected his presence. Cole was thankful now that he had taught his own horses to be quiet on hunting trips. They probably believed he was watching for deer; at least, they made no sound, even though they must have heard the voices of the men.

For the matter of that, he wondered at their apparent carelessness in talking when they did not know how close he might be to them. But when they had passed and he ventured to examine that rock lane more closely, he

saw that no hiding place presented itself, as far as he could look in either direction. His guess that they would never dream he would climb to the top of the rock was evidently correct. They were searching for some sign of him with the horses, and they knew they were alone in that particular passageway.

The thought of Jim perched on some height with field glasses watching for him was to say the least disquieting. It must mean that in the night either Pete or Roper himself had ridden to headquarters, wherever that was, and had brought out the rest of the gang. How many that would be, Cole of course could not know, but from all he had heard of outlaw gangs, he believed there would be several riders poking through this area of primal eruptions. Or was it a great rock field shattered long ago and worn down with water in past ages? He was not geologist enough to know, and mentally he dubbed this "badlands" and let it go that way. Surely it was bad enough from any point of view; bad enough to make him almost despair of ever escaping from the trap.

The only thing he could do was stay where he was on the lip of the niche's end and watch,

motionless, for some further sign of his hunters. It was what a wild animal would do in covert as safe as his, and for the time being he was little better off than a hunted animal; their cunning must be his cunning, their caution his best defense.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLE SHOOTS AS HE RIDES

WITH the fading light of a cloudy sunset, Cole scrambled down into the cleft among his patient horses that greeted his arrival with little nickers of anticipation, expecting to be fed and watered after all these empty hours of inaction. Their eager faith in him hurt Cole beyond words, and added much to his bitterness against Roper and his gang. How long the search for him would continue he had no means of knowing, but it would perhaps be longer than he could endure the thought of hiding here and watching his horses suffer.

For the first time since he left home, Cole wished that he had some of the boys here to advise him. Billy Parrish had fought Indians; he would know what was the best thing to do in such an emergency as this. Gene and Art and Red — if they were here, they could ride out boldly and give the Roper bunch something to think about!

Johnnie reached out his nose and bunted

Cole gently in the ribs, dumbly urging him to remember that this was supper time. Hawk pushed up and nosed him reproachfully; Mick and Eagle begged him for attention. With the imminent expectation of having to make a hurried flight from that retreat, he had left saddle and pack in place, and now his conscience smote him for putting that discomfort as a climax to the hunger and thirst of his mounts.

Sliding his palm along Eagle's smooth barrel to the rump as he walked, he ducked under the rope barrier and went to the corner of the rock wall, listened for a minute and peered out into the twisting alleyway. Nothing moved save the sand blown before the whooping wind; nothing save the whistling of the gale did he hear. From the swiftness with which dusk was falling in that dismal place it would soon be dark. The unknown Jim would have to postpone his spying for a time, and Roper's riders would be searching at random.

Billy Parrish had always taken advantage of night to steal out of whatever tight place he found himself in by day and make his escape, even when Indians lay watching for

such a move. Cole hesitated, glancing back to where four sleek necks were stretched over the rope as four pairs of brown eyes watched him with hungry interest. He bit his lip as their silent pleading struck home, and went back to rub each satiny nose in helpless misery.

"All I'm afraid of is that you might get shot if any of them sees us," he whispered. "Far as I'm concerned, I don't care a damn; but I've got you to think about — and I'd rather see yuh dead than mauled around by them coyotes. I dunno; it's takin' a long chance ——"

"Oh, hell!" he revolted suddenly against all caution. "I can't set here and watch yuh starve to death, either. I guess I can hold my own against 'em, if it comes to a showdown, so we'll go, hosses. You know where there's a creek full of water and grass growin' along the bank, and it's up to you boys to find the way back."

He felt better after that decision and moved briskly to Mick's side, digging into the pack for the extra cartridges he had tucked into the top of a kyack. Then with his rope once more coiled and tied to the saddle, he

mounted and rode quietly out of the niche and down along the ledge.

Once headed back along the way they had come, he looped the reins over the saddle horn and let Johnnie take his own course. For himself, he rode with his hunting carbine in his hands and his eyes turning this way and that, straining through the growing darkness to watch for any movement, any glimpse of men on guard.

Left to himself, Johnnie stepped out briskly in the running walk that made these four horses famous for covering the trails with little effort; an easy pace that carried them down through the winding aisles and up to the ridge where they had lost Roper, before Cole had expected to cover half the distance. At least, the danger of suddenly meeting one of the enemy around some sharp turn was past, and Cole breathed freer as they swung into the faintly defined trail up the side of the ridge that led to the well-remembered switchback farther along. Certainly Johnnie knew where he was headed for, and meant to lose no time in reaching the spot.

Somewhat to Cole's surprise the switchback trail was left unguarded. Johnnie went

down it almost at a trot, the loose horses crowding close to his heels and kicking rocks upon the lower trail in their reckless haste. Cole watched anxiously the trail behind him, though it was now too dark to see much beyond the tail of the hindmost horse, fully expecting some pursuit. But nothing appeared to be abroad in the Sinks that evening, and the boy's spirits rose to a jubilant mood that he had so neatly tricked that traitorously smiling man who had offered him a job, merely for the sake of coaxing him down in here where murder would be perfectly safe and easy of accomplishment.

Now they were passing over the great billowy ridges which Cole vividly recalled. He felt safe now, for he was sure he could have made his way back without trusting to the sure instinct of his horse. He wondered if Johnnie was as thirsty as he was; he certainly was not letting any grass grow under his feet, for now that the trail was fairly easy, he broke into a lope that gradually increased in speed until he flew over those ridges almost at a run. Cole laughed aloud as he listened to the clatter of those galloping hoofs over the gravelly sandstone and wondered if

Roper's men would realize who was riding that trail in such a hurry.

Now they were at the steep incline of the long crevasse which led up out of the Sinks to the higher ridge that bordered the valley. Johnnie slowed to a walk and went scrambling up over the rocks like a mountain sheep, taking his time because he must, yet wasting no seconds either. If a bowlder lay in his path he would pause just long enough to lower his head and give the obstacle an inquiring sniff, and then up he would go, the three others following slavishly where he led.

Cole had put away his rifle in its scabbard beneath his leg, and now he rode with his hand on the butt of his six-shooter. He did not expect to need it now; he had left all danger behind him in the Sinks, he was telling himself, when without any warning he rode out of the cleft and came face to face with three riders who bulked vaguely before him in the trail very much as if they had heard him coming and were waiting for him there.

Instinctively Cole's heels swung inward and Johnnie leaped forward, straight at the

nearest horseman whose horse backed and sidled from the threatened collision.

"Hey, wait a minute!" another called sharply. "What's your hurry?"

"None of your business. Get outa the way!" Cole yelled, and fired a shot more or less at random, as he charged them.

"Git 'im, boys!" some one shouted, as Cole and his horses went thundering up the ridge.

They whirled and came after him, shooting as they rode. Cole sat twisted in his saddle, firing back at them, obliged to aim high because of his horses coming behind. Then Eagle gave a lunge and went clattering past Johnnie, the pack horse racing after him. Cole had the sense to pull out of the trail and let the frightened animals in ahead of him, shooting now with deadly intent at the dim figures that seemed to hesitate at coming in too close.

After all, it was a running fight that was quickly over; a rapid succession of shots, and then Cole was around a sharp curve in the trail, out of sight of the three. He waited a minute, but they must have expected him to do that, for they did not come on and Cole began to suspect that they meant to come at

him from some other direction which he did not know, being a stranger to that particular ridge. He gave Johnnie his head and went galloping away after his horses that were making for the creek and their last camp ground under the lee of the ledge.

Cole would like to have stopped there but it seemed too risky, so he took the lead again when the horses stopped to slake their thirst at the creek, and went on down the winding road which led away from the Sinks. It did not seem likely that Roper's gang would follow him along the highway, deserted though it was. Still, he did not feel in the mood for further fighting— chiefly because of a bullet wound in his wrist which pained considerably and helped to impress upon him the risk he had run of being killed. No, decidedly he wanted no more encounters with Roper's men.

As best he could while he rode along, he bound up his wound with his handkerchief, thankful that the bullet had missed a bone; but it had passed clean through the flesh and there was a good deal of blood, and altogether Cole was in no happy frame of mind as he loped along through the windy dark on a trail he did not know; and when, far in the dis-

tance behind him he heard Eagle's high, shrill call and suddenly discovered that only two horses were following him, Cole Lawson, Junior, was closer to panic than he had ever been in his life.

Hawk answered with an anxious whinny as Cole pulled up and peered into the dark behind him. Roper's gang, he thought, must have ridden after him and managed to rope Eagle — and yet they could scarcely have done that without his hearing them, even if they would attempt such a thing without taking a shot at him. But something must be holding Eagle back against his will, for the horses always kept close together; whatever it was Cole could not go on until he had investigated, had got his little band together again.

To ride back up the trail in the dark would have taxed the courage of a more seasoned soul than Cole Lawson, faint with hunger and the pain of his wound, his nerves suffering from the strain of those long hours in the Sinks. But he went, guiding Johnnie with his knees, the reins wrapped around the saddle horn and his gun held ready in his uninjured hand. The revulsion of finding Eagle alone

in the trail turned him so dizzy that when he dismounted and walked up to the horse he staggered and almost fell. The other horses were nosing around inquisitively, giving no hint of any strange presence in that vicinity. Reassured, Cole pulled himself together and gave Eagle a reproachful slap on the shoulder.

The horse flinched violently from the touch. With a heavy sense of premonition, Cole felt more gently the place and found it sticky and wet. He risked lighting a match to see what was wrong, and before a gust of wind blew it out he saw the ragged wound and groaned an oath of commiseration. Shot in the shoulder, the horse had gamely traveled these miles and kept pace with the others until the stiffening muscles and loss of blood had forced him to give up.

Cole sent a despairing glance around him in the starlight. He could not go on and leave the horse there, nor could he make camp so close to the road; for sooner or later he must sleep, and there was no telling when some of Roper's gang might ride that way. He led the horse slowly away toward a small butte dimly seen against the stars. Off there should

be the creek he had crossed some miles back, and it was vital that he should find it. Where water flowed there should be grass, and Eagle would need food within easy reach. With himself and one horse crippled, he must do some careful planning, but Cole's brain did not seem to function easily in the face of this fresh catastrophe.

He felt that he should leave the horses there and scout ahead a little, but he was afraid that Hawk and Mick would follow him — indeed, they were certain to do that — and that would set Eagle to whinnying again; Cole had a nervous dread of that. So he went forward slowly, stopping every few yards to rest and encourage the horse. He must trust to luck for a feasible place to camp.

They were descending a slope, and he hoped that he was keeping out of sight of the road. A ridge seemed to rise this side of the butte, and as he approached nearer he could discern the faint outline of huge bowlders the size of a house, scattered here and there. These promised concealment, at least, though it was slow, painful work getting Eagle that far.

Finally he stopped, simply because he

hadn't the heart to force the horse to further effort, and managed to get the saddle off Johnnie and the pack off Mick. Working awkwardly with one hand, he unrolled his bed and lay down, too worn out and wholly miserable to care whether he ever got up again or not, yet anxious for daylight so he could find water and dress Eagle's wound and his own; though his own injury seemed less important in spite of the pain, which would have occupied the attention of any man.

But as he lay there, his gloomy thoughts insensibly merged into the inconsequent fabric of dreams that mingled with the whoo-oo of the wind. Sunk deep in the reaction from the strain of the past thirty-six hours, he slept heavily and long, while the disabled Eagle stood drooping near by and the other horses foraged hungrily for grass amongst the sage.

CHAPTER SIX

ENTER MUTT

TWENTY-ONE more or less care-free years leave a good deal of boy in a man, and the boyish quality of youth is resilient beyond belief. After more than two weeks of moody isolation and a bitterness greater even than that despair which had driven his father to suicide, Cole was due for a reaction of some sort.

A weaker nature might have slipped over the edge of normalcy and gone bad, turning another twisted mentality loose upon the world to wreak what havoc it would until the law stepped in with the strong hand of restraint; or, on the other hand, he might have given up the fight as his father had done.

But there was in Cole Lawson a good deal of his mother, and she was brave enough to laugh down the heartaches that came her way and to find a whimsical angle to any problem life gave her to solve. Cole Lawson, Senior, would hide his troubles from the world, but he would not laugh at them; instead he

brooded in secret — and ended with a bullet crashing through his tired brain. Cole's mother had gone out smiling, racked with pain and game to the last breath. Something of each had gone to the making of Cole's nature, and it was his father's side that had sent him away, hating the world that had dealt him hard blows without explaining why. Perhaps he would have gone on hating the world and his fellow men, and turned out altogether spoiled and useless to life and himself, if the Mutt had not chosen to make friends that morning.

The Mutt was lonesome too, and life had dealt him some bitter blows which he did not in the least deserve and which he never would understand, being a dog with a vague past and no talent for introspection. Tragedy had stalked the Mutt's trail and kept him busy dodging, but it had not quenched the indomitable optimism within him which rose valiantly with a quizzical lift of one eyebrow and a hopeful tilt of the head in the very face of disaster.

That optimism held him all aquiver this morning, and the reason for it was a boy with a bandaged wrist lying asleep in the dooryard

that had been a dismal, empty place for so long that all the man tracks were faint and had no smell; and all the tin cans were red with rust and had only shreds of faded labels to say what had once been their contents; and a pair of old, cast-off shoes lying beside the wind-swept woodpile were curled like dried potato parings, with all the nails pulled loose from the soles and showing like small teeth. It spoke well for the fidelity of the Mutt that he still slept under the corner of the cabin next the doorstep where his vanished master had thrown down two old sacks for a bed when the Mutt was a yapping puppy.

How long the little rusty red waif had carried on alone he could not remember; long enough to have almost forgotten the taste and smell of bacon and to learn a good many of the coyote's tricks in hunting; long enough to become very self-assured and capable, but not long enough to lose the lonesome look in his eyes or the hunger for human companionship.

The Mutt had been off hunting rabbits and he had not come home until dawn. His first yelp of surprise at finding visitors there having produced no definite effect, he had circled and barked for a while, sniffing investigatively be-

tween spasms. But the horses continued their feeding and gave him scant attention; and the young man lying covered with a blanket to his boots, which thrust boldly out into the soft glow of sunrise, might have been dead for all the movement he made. The Mutt's barking diminished and finally ceased. Full fed, occasionally licking the chops that were whiskered like a little old Irishman, he sat down to consider these unexpected arrivals. Especially did the long figure covered with the gray blanket interest him. Curiosity pulled him nearer; he sniffed the tanned young face with its scowl of pain and loneliness and bewildered sorrow, he sniffed the blood-stiffened bandage on the wrist.

Cole's well arm thrashed out, fell upon the blanket, lay there slack. The Mutt stood looking it over, smelt the friendly man smell which he had missed out of his life, edged forward, and began licking the fingers with growing affection and enthusiasm. The hand drew away, lifted to the boy's face, fell across the closed lids, lifted again and dropped to the blankets, tensing to support the weight of arm and shoulder as Cole raised himself up and stared blinking all around him. His eyes

turned toward the dog, sitting very straight upon a stub of tail that vainly tried to wag. He stared uncomprehendingly into wistful brown eyes that held the light of expectancy emphasized by the sidewise tilt of the dog's head, the quizzical arch of one eyebrow with a black spot the size of a dime.

"Hello, you Mutt!" said Cole, and grinned for the first time in two weeks.

"Woo-oh!" answered Mutt, and rose straight up on his stubby tail, his capable paws folded across his brindle belly like a ground squirrel.

The two sat looking at each other measuringly. Cole snapped thumb and finger, and the dog exploded into wriggling, fawning ecstasy. Forequarters laid to the ground, he yelped and sprang. He was in Cole's arms, licking, whimpering inarticulate endearments, smelling rapturously.

"You Mutt, you!" Cole struggled up, holding his face away from that whipping, eager pink tongue. "Quit slobbering, darn yuh! Say, where'd you come from, I'd like to know?"

This was the first time the rusty red, small dog of no particular breed had ever been

addressed as Mutt, but he seemed to like the name better than he had liked anything in a long while, even jack rabbit carried straight home and eaten warm under the cabin, or devoured on the spot where he made the kill, if he were hungry as he had been to-night; he had taken his rabbits as he found them, thankfully but without fuss; certainly not with the joyful contortions, the yelps, the frenzied lickings with which he attested his joy over this new adventure.

Cole got up and stood looking about him. What he had thought were huge square bowlders, such as abounded in that valley, were in reality a cabin and a ramshackle shed with a rusty barbed-wire fence straggling around it. Half the posts were down or leaning crazily to the pull of the sagged wires and the shed roof seemed about to fall in at one corner. A deserted place, by every sordid sign save the dog.

Watchful, Cole walked over to the cabin and looked in through the open doorway. Many whooping gales such as this last one had been must have swung the door off its hinges, for it lay tilted against the table. In the corner at the back a pole bunk held a rat's

nest, little sticks piled up in a rounded heap. Two rats scurried out, jumped to the dirt floor and dodged out past Cole as he leaned, looking in.

"Sic' 'em, Mutt! Go git 'em — atta boy!"

With all the zest of youth, Cole watched the brief, zigzag race, slapped his thigh in approval when the Mutt darted in ahead and caught the hindmost rat, shaking it viciously before he let it drop limp.

"Atta boy — nabbed 'im, didn't yuh? Some dog, ain't yuh?"

But catching rats could not divert him long from the business in hand, which was to find water and give Eagle's wound such dressing as was possible. He thought there must be a spring somewhere near, or the creek within easy distance, and presently he discovered an old trail worn into the gravel with weeds growing up in it wherever the soil offered any sustenance for vegetation. As he started along it, the Mutt slipped past him and trotted sophisticatedly ahead, lifting his knees high like a spirited horse.

Cole laughed at the impudence of the gait, and that in itself was sufficient justification for the Mutt's existence. Cole had needed some-

thing to make him laugh as a boy would laugh.

Mutt and the dim old pathway led him to a choked spring where the water lay yellow in a grassy bowl, slim-bodied insects darting across its surface. No stock, Cole decided, ever watered there; which argued that the creek was not far off and that this dilapidated camp was probably never visited by any one. Certainly the place bore no sign of having been disturbed for months. The stagnant water did not appeal to Cole, but the trickle from a finger-wide crack in the rock above was clear and cold to his lips. Cole held his throbbing, bandaged wrist under the thin stream until the cloth was soaked, and returned to Eagle.

Mutt, with that same brisk, high-stepping gait, trotted before him, frisking as he had almost forgotten to frisk — one needed human friends for audience when one did that — and deporting himself generally after the manner of a nondescript, rusty red dog with an enormous capacity for affection that has been starved and thwarted until all at once it finds expression in strange and pestiferous ways. All the while Cole was ministering to the

wounded horse, the Mutt — or plain Mutt he had become — barked and played and cavorted madly among the bushes. He jumped clear off the ground, tongue out for a passing lick at Cole's face. He pounced and gnawed and worried Cole's boots, flying back to growling attack when Cole pushed him off. Tiring of that, he went off and barked at Johnnie and his mates, busily grazing around the roots of the bushes for the tender grass roots which grew there. He was all dog, obtrusive, irrepressible, forcing attention; a Mutt, a mental tonic for Cole who, having laughed at him once, laughed often that day.

That evening, having pitched his tepee tent beyond the cabin near the spring, where it would not easily be seen by any chance rider who came that way, Cole sat on his bed roll with the dog in the crook of his arms and carried on quite a conversation. His horses grazed near by, the wind was down and the sky a gemmed glory of stars. Eagle stood beside the spring where he could drink without having to stir from his tracks, and leisurely munched dry grass which Cole had patiently gathered, squaw-fashion, in an old burlap sack. Up on the ridge behind him

an owl hooted in measured accents to his mate, and on the high slope of the little butte a coyote yammered at the world.

For the first time since he rode away from the C Bar L, Cole's eyes were unshadowed, the deep crease was smoothed from between his eyebrows. He could look about him with a sigh almost of content; for scant comforts it is true and for small mercies perhaps, but content nevertheless. He had needed a friend and he had found one that did not know his tragic secret, that would not question him about his past, that would never care who or what he had been before to-day. For Mutt it was enough to snuggle there in Cole's arms, full fed with man-cooked food, no longer forlorn.

"You're a great old Mutt, ain't yuh?" Cole whispered, bending low to speak into one lifted ear. "Guess he was lonesome here all by himself; guess it's pretty lucky I happened along — hunh?"

And Mutt, whimpering endearments, reached up and licked the boy adoringly on the neck in eloquent response.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALSO THE WOP

HURTS deeper and more lasting than gunshot wounds healed there in that lonely hollow in the month that followed. For a time Cole's activities were confined to little necessary tasks which he could perform one-handed while his wrist healed. It kept him fairly busy, for he must spend hours each day pulling grass for Eagle, whose shoulder must have perfect rest until the torn muscles renewed themselves with fresh tissue.

Cole could not understand that long, ragged wound, until he decided that it must have been made by a bullet that had flattened against a rock and ricochetted at a tangent, finding Eagle's shoulder in its path and tearing a way through the muscles; an ugly wound which would have cost a veterinarian some anxious thought.

At first, Cole kept the horses close under cover of the ridge in daylight, turning them loose at night to graze. Hourly he waited for discovery, grimly determined to shoot at sight.

"Shoot first and ask questions afterwards — eh, Mutt?" But when day after quiet day slid behind him and no one came to the hollow where the deserted camp stood forlornly in a welter of high sagebrush, Cole insensibly relaxed his vigilance and wandered afoot beyond the ridge and found the creek, just as he had expected, flowing quietly along through a rocky little ravine into which the horses picked their careful way to drink.

"Say, a fellow could build a dam across this narrow neck, and run ditches and raise hay down below there. Wonder why nobody ever thought of that before? Mutt, how'd you like to turn nester?" It was an idle thought, no more than the recognition of a natural opportunity going to waste, but it gave evidence of a healthier state of mind. Cole was beginning to interest himself in his surroundings, to forget the cataclysm from which he had fled.

He wondered what had happened to the fellow who had built the cabin, had dug post holes and stretched wire and fashioned that crude shed for his horses. Some one who had meant to start a ranch, he guessed; some one who had left unexpectedly, who had not just

moved out in accordance with some change of plan. For while the cabin had been gutted it had been done hastily, and many things had been left which the owner would have wanted to take with him. Books, half a sack of weevily flour, a box of dried fruit, wormy beans.

It looked to Cole as if something must have happened to the man who lived there; as if he might have been robbed — killed, perhaps. It would not be surprising in a country that held John Roper, he thought. Perhaps this was why the place was left so completely to itself; why Mutt, in all the months he must have lived here by himself, had found no human companionship until Cole wandered into the hollow that night. Whatever the reason for its complete desertion, the place offered sanctuary now, when Cole most needed it, and if there was reason why the place should be deliberately shunned, so much the better for him. Eagle's wound was slow to heal and Cole could not move on until the horse was in condition to travel.

After a while, when no one came near and the dilapidation of the cabin and corral began to get on his nerves, Cole set to work making

repairs. He cleaned out the cabin, mended the door, removed a rat's nest. When he had moved in he fixed the corral fence, straightening the posts and nailing the wire back in place. There were tools enough in the shed, and the work served to pass away the time. He was glad now that he had bought plenty of supplies at that little store and post-office down below the Muleshoe ranch. He would not go hungry if he spent another month in the hills.

Then one morning here came Mutt from one of his hunting trips, and with him came the Wop — named in the first startled sentence when Cole set eyes upon him. The Wop was a pot-bellied old burro with limp ears that spoke of deep-seated melancholy and a disposition which leaned toward unexpected nippings and small heels lifted with amazing suddenness against whatever chanced to annoy him.

Stepping high, Mutt led him triumphantly to the very door of the cabin where Cole stood grinning at the pair. Cole was so unwise as to offer the burro a piece of bannock and a bacon rind, and that settled it. The lonely little camp came under the rule of the Wop,

and nothing short of shooting would have eliminated him.

That day Cole was obliged to take Eagle by slow, hobbling degrees to the corral and shut him inside, reinforcing the wire fence with sagebrush to keep the Wop outside. That day, too, he scoured out an old zinc washtub and placed it in the corral for a watering trough, because the Wop and Eagle had developed a feud at first sight and a horse with only one good front leg can't kick the paunch off a burro, however much he may want to do so.

"I oughta brain you, Mutt, for bringing that moth-eaten monstrosity home with you!" Cole grumbled, while he wiped the sweat of toil from his face after hacking sagebrush with a dull ax and carrying it to build the barricade between Eagle and his enemy. "You wait till Eagle gets well! I bet the Wop will hit for the hills again and keep on going. The place for that bird is the Sinks."

Still, the Wop stayed and Cole in his friendlier moments doled out crusts of bannock and laughed at the pestiferous little beast; which made the Wop's presence worth while, whether Cole realized it or not.

One night, after he had sat for a long while on the doorstep with Mutt curled between his feet and his guitar pressed against him while he stared down over the quiet starlit valley and plucked wistful thrumming melodies from the instrument, Cole had a dream — a vivid, colorful dream which stayed with him all the next day and for days thereafter, dragging him back to his misery and adding the burden of loneliness to the homesickness it bred.

He had dreamed of the C Bar L boys; of Billy Parrish and Gene and Red. He had been riding with them on round-up, hazing cattle out of the brushy draws, talking and laughing with them. Later he had been at camp, eating supper and lazily spinning his rope in a circle around him, hopping in and out while the boys lay around on the ground, smoking as they watched him. It was very real; too real. In some subtle way the secluded little valley with the old cabin set back in the hollow against the ridge had changed overnight. He had gone to bed thinking that he would like to make a ranch of this place, wondering if it were government land open to settlement. He got up realizing how empty

the place was, remembering how long it had been since he had exchanged laughing words with any man.

He wished now — for a matter of minutes — that he had not repulsed the friendship and sympathy of the C Bar L boys. They had tried to treat him like a brother and he had turned his back on them, snarled at them, told them to leave him alone. Well, they had done it, that last day. They had ridden off to town and left him there, eyeing him askance with hurt reproach. The sheriff had tried, and he too had gone off half angry, willing to let Cole go his own gait.

Now Cole was dimly aware of a great loss which he had thus far ignored. Loss of his father, loss of the ranch, the cattle, the horses — yes, there was that. But the loss of friends, of young fellows to ride out with him on the trail of adventure; fellows to joke with him, argue with him, wrestle and work with him — he had lost all this too, thrown it away from him foolishly, childishly, just because trouble had come and he had hated the thought of their knowing!

Not all of this did Cole realize perhaps, for he was not much given to analysis. But he

knew that he missed the boys terribly and that this was a lonesome hole and there was no use in living like a hermit. Just as soon as Eagle could travel he would get out and find a job with some decent outfit, and have fellows to talk with. The whole country couldn't be filled with men like Roper and his gang, who would kill a man for four horses.

He could make friends — he always had been able to make friends, and he didn't believe it was because folks thought his father was rich, either. He could go back right now and find plenty of friends; but he wouldn't, because they would be sorry for him and he did not want sympathy. No, even now he was determined that he would make his way among strangers. If he ever went back, it would be when he had money, cattle, land, was a successful stockman who had made every dollar on his own hook, without any friendly boosting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FIGHTING COWGIRL

COLE was in the corral, trying to make himself believe that Eagle was fit for the trail again in spite of the fact that the horse moved stiffly when he moved at all and seemed to prefer standing in the shade of the shed, dozing and switching his tail apathetically at the droning flies. He did not care now whether the other horses were near him or not. He was content to eat the grass Cole brought him, to sip a little water from the old tub, to nod and blink the hours away. He was getting lazy, said Cole; he needed exercise in those shoulder muscles. He needn't think Cole meant to spend the rest of his life rustling grass for him in a gunny sack, just to save him the trouble of finding it himself. But in spite of Cole's coaxing and upbraidings, in spite of morsels of bannock held out enticingly while Cole backed slowly away from him, Eagle did not show any enthusiasm for walking. The torn muscles in his shoulder were still stiff and painful and he had learned the

foolishness of useless effort. Even cold bannock did not seem to him worth that price.

But in the midst of his apathy he threw up his head and stared past Cole at something beyond. There was a muffled pounding of galloping hoofs sweeping down into the hollow. Cole whirled and looked that way, then ran for the gate.

Down through a depressed place in the ridge came a dozen horses running straight for the cabin, or perhaps straight for the opposite side of the basin, which would take them past the cabin. Fifteen or twenty, Cole estimated them at a glance, with several colts running alongside their mothers. Behind them, swinging a rope and shouting, a single rider galloped.

Cole stopped outside the gate and stood watching the little herd wistfully as it clattered past. Some cowboy bringing in horses for the fall round-up, he guessed. There must be a ranch, then, farther down the creek. It did strike him as unusual that only one man was driving the bunch, but there was always the chance that the riders had become separated and would meet farther along. A nice

little bunch of mixed stock — and then he gave a shout and started running.

Very cleverly the rider had swung the herd toward Cole's horses, feeding down toward the creek. The horses had gone tearing in among them, swept them along with heads and tails up, stepping high as if they thought it a great adventure.

Instantly Cole thought of Roper. Had they discovered his retreat here under the ridge and taken this seemingly innocent way of getting his horses? It did not seem likely that they would risk the attempt with only one man, but then there might be others hiding behind the ridge, waiting to see what would happen and ready to take a hand in the foray if necessary. That would be like Roper, who apparently planned always to make a sure thing of his stealings.

No matter. Cole pulled his gun and fired two shots after the rider as he ran. It was simpler than shooting tin cans as he galloped past them, and he would probably have made a hit if the range had been shorter. Even at that distance he had the satisfaction of seeing the rider's hat go sailing to the ground, and he went down on one knee, meaning to take a

more careful aim next time, when the rider swerved and came galloping back, waving a six-shooter. It was not that flourishing of a gun instead of shooting that made Cole give a grunt of dismay and get upon his feet. It was the long, tawny braid whipping out behind the rider's bare head.

"Put up your hands! What the devil do you mean, shooting at me? Do you want me to kill you?" She had ridden close and pulled up her horse before Cole, glaring down at him while she pointed the gun more or less in his direction.

"What are you running off with my horses for?" Cole retorted angrily. "Why wouldn't I shoot? There was no way of knowing you are a girl — in that outfit!"

That outfit happened to be a pair of bib overalls, and the girl looked ready to murder him.

"You'd have shot anyway," she told him unfairly, her eyes blazing. "What are you doing on our land, anyway? You've no business here with your horses. Go get my hat! Go on, before I take a shot at you!"

Cole looked at her, looked at his gun which he was still holding in spite of her command

that he put up his hands. He gave a snort and slid the gun into its holster.

"All right — you could shoot a man and it would be fine and dandy, but you know darn well I couldn't shoot a woman."

"Sure, you couldn't. Give me that gun!"

"You go to — thunder!"

"Give — me — that *gun!*" Had she been on the ground, the girl would undoubtedly have stamped her foot at him.

"I'd like to see you take it off me!"

"Maybe you think I couldn't!"

"I give you leave to try it."

"Well, I don't need it, or I would. I can kill you with this one, quick enough."

"Oh, sure!"

"Will you pick up that hat?"

"Certainly!" Cole was mad, and he did not intend that she should get away with his horses, but there was no reason why he should not get her hat for her. He wanted to see just where he had hit it.

As he walked down to where the hat lay brim up on the sand, the girl rode after him, her horse held firmly to a pace that kept his nose within nipping reach of Cole's shoulder. Indeed, a blob of bit slobber landed moistly

against Cole's ear and that young man started at the unexpectedness of the contact.

"Oh, you aren't shot — yet," the girl maliciously assured him, and Cole hated her for the implication that he had jumped because he was afraid.

"Glad you told me," he sneered, and stooped for the hat. As he picked it up and saw the brown hole in the crown alarmingly close to the band, saw too the cut where the other bullet had clipped the brim, his heart gave a thud of dismay; a close call, that.

"What rotten shooting!" said the girl, seeing how his cheeks had paled and probably understanding why.

"Not so good," he admitted perversely, looking her fairly in the eyes as he gave her the hat. "I need practice."

"I don't." The girl dropped the reins over the saddle horn, took her hat and settled it expertly with one motion on her head. But she did not tuck up the tawny braid under the crown, because to do that she would need both hands and she would not put away the gun. "I couldn't miss that way if I tried. When I shoot, I—mean business."

"Well, what about my horses? When you

drive off a man's horses, do you mean business too?"

"I didn't drive off your horses. They went along with my bunch because they wanted to. They don't belong here, anyway. You have no business on our land. I advise you to get off it."

"And I advise you to bring back my horses."

"Oh, you do!" She seemed to consider, eyeing him with a lurking imp in her eyes. Cole would have called it a devil.

"Well, I don't want your horses mixed up with mine, I can tell you that. And I'm certainly not going to hold a round-up all by myself to please you. If you want your horses, you can hike along to the ranch after them. It's only seven or eight miles."

Cole knew where he wanted to tell her to go, but he could not bring himself to say it. According to his simple code, one did not swear at girls. One took them to dances and danced with them and made sly love when the other fellow was watching with murderous eyes, and — when one was that particular kind of a saphead — one fell in love and married and settled down. But no fellow

with any manners or any self-respect ever swore at a girl.

"What's that horse doing in that corral? Why don't you ride him after your horses?" She had turned and was looking back at Eagle; now she turned a suspicious glance toward Cole.

"He's laid up. I can't ride him."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Shot — er — cut with barb wire. He's lame. You'll have to bring my horses back, I tell you. I certainly am not going after them afoot," he told her with stubborn eyes and compressed lips.

"Say, I don't *have* to do *anything!*" Supreme scorn vibrated in her voice as with a twitch of the reins she rode back to the corral. "We'll see about this horse shot with barbed wire. Sounds like a lie, to me."

Cole did not reply to that but contented himself with wishing furiously that she was a man. While she sat on her horse and stared over the brush-woven wire fence at Eagle, who stared back rather apathetically, Cole got his rope. Whatever this damnable girl did or said, he meant to have his horses back and he did not mean to walk seven or eight

miles after them, either. Just how he was going to recover them without walking after them, he had probably not decided, but his actions indicated that he expected her to drive the bunch back where he could rope out his own animals. At any rate, he started off toward the creek with his rope looped over his arm, walking unhurriedly and carefully refraining from looking behind him. Mutt came loping down off the ridge to join him, yelping joyously that his master was actually going for a walk. Even the Wop came loitering out from among some high bushes, stopped to waggle his great ears in deep cogitation and then made up his mind that whatever was in the wind he meant to share.

The girl, however, did not overtake Cole until he was across the creek and following the dust cloud kicked up by the horses as they trotted away down the valley which he had thought would make a good hay meadow. Then she came loping behind him, settling her horse to a walk when she had overtaken him.

"I must say you've been making yourself at home," she remarked, after a dozen paces during which Cole refused to recognize her

presence. "Can't say I'd want to sleep in a bunk a man had lain dead in for a month, but some folks are not very particular."

"I wish you'd go haze those horses back here," Cole said in a throttled voice, after another five minutes of silence. "You had no business driving them off in the first place."

"If I rode on ahead, you'd probably use me for a target again. You said you needed practice."

"Oh, hell!" said Cole, but he said it into his shirt collar.

"And blazes," said the girl calmly. "Besides, I didn't drive them off. They went because they wanted to. I've got enough to do without wrangling horses for hide-outs." With that she touched her horse lightly with the quirt and rode on away from him, sitting her horse with the easy grace of a slim young cowboy; of Cole himself, for instance, since he was slim and young and rode like a Centaur.

At this moment he walked stiffly, like a man going up to challenge a bully to an old-fashioned fight. Whenever his toe struck against a stone he gave it a kick that sent it spinning. The girl looked back and caught

him doing that once, and he could hear her laugh as she rode on.

"Lucky thing for her she ain't a man!" gritted Cole, the veins standing out on his forehead with the beating blood of his impotent wrath. Of course he couldn't take a shot at her now, knowing her for a woman; but he wanted to, badly enough — or at least, he thought he did. To trail her down that valley afoot was the most humiliating thing Cole had ever done in his life, but he had to go. A girl like that — with a tongue like that — never in this world would she drive back his horses. No, she gloried too much in making him walk after them. Trying to get back at him for shooting at her, he supposed. Well, how was he to know the difference?

"If she wants to wear breeches like a man, she can take her chance of being shot like one!" He dismissed that incident, glaring after her with hot, angry eyes. "Hide-out! Oh, damn her, anyway!" After that he damned Johnnie and Hawk and Mick for stampeding with her galloping herd. They ought to know better; they did know better, but horses will be horses, however carefully they have been brought up; however well

trained they may be, there is always the element of mob psychology to reckon with. Cole walked half a mile while he invented new and vividly profane ways of threatening to beat the tar out of those three runaways when he got his hands on them, but in his heart he knew that they were forgiven before they were caught, and that he was merely venting a little of his anger on them because there were such well-defined limits to what he could say of a girl.

CHAPTER NINE

COLE MAKES A FRIEND

FARTHER down the creek where the butte thrust out a rocky toe as if to wall in the valley and permit only the little willow-fringed stream to go creeping past, the girl reined in sharply behind the steeply sloping barrier and dismounted, leading her horse behind a high rock out of sight and anchoring the reins by the simple method of laying a loose rock upon the ends. Then, picking her way back to the end of the bold projection, she settled herself to watch Cole's unwilling and somewhat toilsome approach.

Not more than a long rifle shot away down the creek, the little herd that had, with its clattering rush, stampeded Cole's horses was now taking time from its homeward journey to make squealing acquaintance with the three strangers in their midst. Where the butte had again drawn back and left a small, sage-covered flat beside the creek, the horses were circling and playing, lifting heels in pre-

tended dislike, nipping necks, tossing heads and uttering shrill, hypocritical squeals as they touched noses with the newcomers in momentary how-de-do.

Glancing that way to make sure that there was no real trouble brewing, and that the horses were only playing like unmannerly children, the girl turned back to her real object in stopping there; which was watching Cole through a pair of field glasses much the worse for hard usage on horseback. Certain nicks in the lenses did not add much to their efficiency, but the girl was used to making allowances for what she saw. At any rate she could see that Cole's stride was still truculent and his face still scowling and that he looked as if he were on the trail of his worst enemy and fully intended to commit murder when he got his hands on the victim. There was nothing in Cole's look or manner to excite mirth, yet the girl giggled as she watched him. Or perhaps she was laughing at Mutt, trotting alongside Cole with that high, prancing gait and an arrogant tilt to his head; or at the Wop, trailing dismally along in the rear, the picture of shaggy, pot-bellied woe that could only manifest itself by the dejected

droop of the great, limp ears and the melancholy sag of the lower lip.

When Cole drew near to the rocky point where she was hidden, the girl lowered the glasses and feasted her impish eyes on the picture of throttled rage which he made. Then he spied the sportive herd not far beyond and his face lighted eloquently in anticipation of getting back his own. The girl's hand went over her mouth to suppress her laughter when she saw how eagerly he took down his rope and widened a loop, how meticulously he arranged the coil so that it would cast out freely with no hitch or tangle.

"You, Johnnie! Thus-and-so your blink-blink ornery hide; get outa that bunch before I bounce a rock off your back, you tra-la-la and-I-wish-you-may-die so-and-so et cetera!" Cole's voice would have carried farther than a bullet had he shot while he spoke, for all his pent wrath was in the words — freely translated here, you understand.

The girl gave a gasp of horrified delight and ducked back to where her horse was hidden. Another rod and Cole must have discovered her hiding there, but as it was she

jumped her horse out before his astonished eyes and galloped away to the herd, yelling and swinging her rope-end with a whooping sound that sent the horses wheeling into full flight with a great kicking of dust and a tossing of heads as they scampered toward home, Johnnie of the blackened reputation, Hawk and Mick galloping rapturously in their midst.

Once more Cole bitterly regretted her sex that held him absolutely helpless, his gun standing uselessly in its holster, even his fluent speech halting paralyzed upon his tongue. In utter silence he recoiled his rope and went on doggedly tramping through the thin dust haze which floated like a gray veil behind the vanishing herd.

By the way that gray veil hung suspended over the creek bank a mile farther on, Cole knew that the herd had halted again, perhaps to drink and splash water in the ford, while the girl held back and waited for him to come up. He hated the thought of playing up to her expectations, but there was no way out for him. If he must follow her forty miles, he must follow her forty miles; that was all there was to be said about it, for he meant

to have his horses back. A man who was not a thief might have relented and let him catch his own horses out of the herd. That was the unwritten law of the range, and the breaking of it willfully was merely an invitation to fight. But with a girl like this one all rules were suspended and there was no law. She would do as she pleased, and it looked very much as if she pleased to tantalize Cole with that herd and force him to walk as far as possible for his horses.

Which is exactly what she did do.

She was an expert hand at driving a herd, Cole was forced to admit that much to himself. She knew just when to loiter along and let the horses settle down to graze and play, so that Cole would have time to come up almost near enough to have some hope of getting back his own; maddeningly near, but never quite so close that Johnnie would feel the necessity of obeying the note of authority in Cole's voice. She knew just how and when to start them moving onward — Cole would never believe that her whirlwind descent into the hollow and the carrying off of his own horses in the rush was the accident she had proclaimed it to be. She had planned to

stampede them; he would always think that, no matter what she said.

With that skill in driving, she managed to arrive at the ranch corral with Cole and Mutt so close behind her that they seemed one friendly party, man and dog walking while the lady rode horseback. A damnable lie to put upon the appearance of things, Cole stormed within himself as he came up.

A little, plump woman of middle age and a lovable, sweet face set down two full milk buckets and hurried to open the corral gate, and the horses trooped in as the girl dismounted beside the stable and started to unsaddle. The older woman closed the gate upon the milling herd and turned an inquiring gaze upon Cole.

"Good evening," she greeted him with a pleasant little note of welcome which overrode her surprise. "You haven't had an accident, I hope? Did your horse throw you?"

"His stock got mixed with my bunch, Mom so he came along after them," the girl informed her mother equably, as if it were the most commonplace incident in the world.

"Your saddle horse and all? Too bad!

But now you're here, you must have supper with us, Mr. ——"

"Cole. Not Mr. anything — just Cole." He did not know why he said that. The words had come out of their own accord. Later, he thought he must have wanted her to call him Cole from the beginning, because her voice and her ways reminded him so much of his mother.

"Well — Cole, come right on up to the house and have supper with us before you bother about your horses. They're safe in the corral, and I just put hay in the mangers so they won't go hungry. Dorthy, I wish you'd bring the eggs out of the loft when you come in. I haven't had time to gather them. You won't object to bacon and eggs for supper, will you — Cole?"

"I — thank you, but I can't stop. I ——"

"Oh, yes, you can. You wouldn't insult an old lady who thinks well of her cooking! Besides, we must do what we can to make amends for getting our horses mixed with yours and putting you to all this trouble of coming after them afoot. Of course you'll have supper with us."

With that gentle ultimatum she turned and

picked up the two buckets of milk. The act, unconscious as it was from long custom, jarred Cole out of his angry aloofness. A little woman like that packing two heavy buckets of milk? Not while he was around!

"Oh, no — never mind. I'm used to it — I don't think anything of it," she protested, flushing a little with a pretty flutter of confusion when Cole would have taken them from her.

"My mother never had to do the milking, or pack two buckets of anything!" Cole blurted almost roughly, his own tanned cheeks flushing oddly as he looked into her eyes.

"Your mother missed something, then." But she released her hold on the handles and walked beside Cole up the path to the house. "I really don't mind doing the milking; it has to be done, and I'm glad I've got the health and strength to do it. Dorthy has enough to do without having the chores on her shoulders."

Cole had nothing to say to that.

"Did you have to walk far? You look pretty hot and tired. A cowboy does hate to be set afoot! I should think Dorothy could have ridden into the bunch and roped

out your saddle horse. Why didn't she?"

"I didn't know she could rope," Cole said lamely. Inwardly he was furious because he must defend the girl to save the mother's feelings. She would be terribly shocked to know how her precious "Dorthy" had acted, he thought.

"You didn't? Why, Dorthy is one of the best hands with a rope there is in this country! Even if you didn't know it, I don't see why she didn't catch out your horse for you. She shouldn't have let you walk all this — how far did you walk?"

"About — not very far. It was easier to come on to the corral. I didn't mind the hike." But the lie was for her, not for the girl, he wanted to add.

"Well, that's all right, then. She wanted you to come for supper, I guess. Dorthy does get pretty lonesome; young folks need some one to talk to, more than older folks do. When you get along toward sundown you have plenty to think about and you don't feel there's so much to say."

"You aren't anywhere near sundown!" Cole warmly protested, setting down the milk buckets inside the spring house where she had

led him. He turned now and smiled down into her eyes, pushing back his hat with the boyish gesture his mother had loved; certain girls of the Black Rim too, if the truth were known.

She laughed, happily and with an adorable shyness which made Cole want to hug her. Funny, he thought, how she could be the mother of an impossible creature like Dorthy. Maybe she was only a stepmother. Surely there couldn't be any blood relationship between those two.

"Just for that you shall have a cup of new milk," she chuckled. "I'd like to know your mother and tell her what a nice boy she has. Do you live anywhere ——"

"She's dead," Cole said bluntly to head off inconvenient questions. "No, I'm a stranger here. Just riding through."

"Too bad." Here voice was instantly remorseful. "Seems to me you're pretty young to be off among strangers, but boys grow up before we know it and want to go riding off to see the world for themselves. You can't be much older than my Dorothy. She's twenty."

"That so?" Then in spite of himself, "I'm twenty-one. Let me strain the milk. Those buckets are heavy. Say, you've got a

wonderful milk house here, haven't you? You must milk lots of cows."

She told him all about how the stone milk house had grown from the first primitive brush shelter over the spring, and how her husband — "Dorothy's father," she called him, thus unconsciously answering one of Cole's mental questions — had built the house and the milk house and the whole ranch, bit by bit, in odd times between working for their richer neighbors.

"Just like the coral builders, I used to tell him," she laughed, as if it were all a joke. "We came here with nothing but a couple of cows and one work team and a saddle horse; yes, and an old hen with thirteen chicks that my mother gave me when I was married. At first we lived in a tent, right where this house stands. Then Dorthy's father managed to get this kitchen part built, for us to winter in. Dorthy was born right in this room! We cooked and lived and slept right here for two years before we got another room built on. By that time the tent was just about whipped into ribbons, so we just had to have more shelter. Young folks don't know what it's like to rough it, nowadays.

"Our two sons are buried back up here on the hill. Dorthy's father had a boy by his first marriage, and when we got the big room built on, he went and got him from his wife's folks — she died when the boy was born — and we raised him from then on. His father thought he'd be a help on the place as he got older."

A faint inflection of regret in her voice gave Cole the impression that she did not consider her stepson such a help as they had hoped he would be, but the shadow passed and she was smiling again and taking a hatful of eggs from the girl who came into the kitchen at that moment and stooped to give her mother a kiss.

"Steve didn't get back yet, Mom?" The girl paused in the doorway of another room, completely ignoring Cole's presence in the room.

"No, Dorthy. Didn't you see anything of him?" Her mother's glance and tone were anxious.

"I was back in the hills, toward Black Butte. I didn't see anybody at all."

"Nobody at all? Where did you meet this young man, then?"

"Oh — he was camped at Looey's cabin. I brought the horses down through there. What you got for supper, Mommy? I'm half starved."

"Looey's cabin? Why, that must be nine miles! Why in the world ——" There was no use in finishing the question, for Dorothy had gone in and closed the door behind her. Cole was surprised that she did not slam it.

Mrs. Harris (Cole learned the name later that evening) looked at Cole in shocked enlightenment, but it spoke well for her absolute loyalty to her own that she made no comment upon the fact that he had walked nine miles simply because her daughter would not rope his horse out of the loose bunch. She seemed to realize too that there had been trouble of some sort; that relations were strained between this well-mannered young man and her daughter. She looked at him keenly, saw nothing there to arouse distrust — though he did look rather sullen — and hurried her preparations for supper.

It was when she went to set the chairs to the table that she caught sight of the bullet hole in her daughter's hat, which Dorothy had flung down as she came in. Mrs. Harris

picked up the hat and twirled it slowly upon a forefinger while she examined the telltale marks. Having lived in that rough country all those years, she must know a good deal about bullet holes, Cole thought. She did not say anything, but her eyes went to Cole's face and remained there, holding his glance with remorseless questioning.

"I did that — by mistake. I thought she was a man stealing my horses, and I took a shot at her before I — saw. Her hair came down before I took aim again. So ——"

"So *that's* why you walked in!" A lurking gleam, somewhat like the devil in her daughter's eyes, lighted her glance for an instant and was gone. Her breath hissed gently out between her teeth as she turned and hung the hat on a nail beside a window.

"Well, supper's ready," she announced briskly, dismissing the matter as if with the sweep of invisible hands. "Dorthy, are you ready for your supper?" Then, quite unexpectedly, she came over and dropped a hand lightly upon Cole's shoulder.

"Son, you're a good shot," she said shortly. "It's a dangerous accomplishment sometimes — if you shoot before you're sure."

CHAPTER TEN

"BULLETS AND BLOTCHED BRANDS——"

DOROTHY came out of the other room so changed that Cole would not have recognized her if she had kept that devilish gleam from her eyes when she flicked a sidelong glance in his direction. She was dressed in soft, dull blue with a white lace collar which even Cole could see was handmade. She was slim and straight and not very tall, and her hair was done low and parted on the left side and waved down in nature's own original idea of a Marcel wave, with little loose tendrils curling around her ears. But Cole did not think she was pretty, for all that. He hated her and scorned to see any good in her whatever. Only the sweetness of her mother — yes, and the delectable odor of bacon and eggs and coffee — prevented him from stalking out of the house when she entered the room. He did rise and stand beside his chair until she was seated (Not all range men are ignorant of social usage, in spite of what is told and pictured of them), but he set his teeth together

while he did so, and would not look at her.

"I know you must both be starved, so start right in while I pour your coffee. Cole, do you take cream and sugar?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Harris. I prefer mine black, if you please." Cole smiled his best social smile at her while his eyes turned for a venomous glance at the girl, who he felt was watching him.

"You're wasting a chance at this thick cream," sighed Mrs. Harris, as she handed Cole his cup. "I forgot to ask you how you liked your eggs, Cole, so just help yourself to the ones you like. There's hard and soft both.

"Dorthy, I didn't get any wood cut for the bathtub, yet. I thought maybe Steve would be back and I could get him to drag up some brush from the creek. I didn't like to use that good wood — I wanted to save it for baking; and brush heats the bathtub just as well."

Cole's swift, under-the-eyebrows glance caught a flush of embarrassment on Dorothy's cheeks, but her voice remained matter of fact.

"I'll drag up some brush after supper, Mom."

"I'll be glad to get you some wood, Mrs.

Harris. My horse Johnnie will haul as much as a team ——"

Dorothy choked on a hastily swallowed bit of bread, and had to leave the table. A cold sweat appeared on the brow of the young man, who abruptly recalled certain blistering phrases shouted at Johnnie. She did hear, then! A red tide of shame swept from Cole's collar up to his thick brown hair and receded, leaving his face slightly pale and set. Well, damn it, it served her right for caching herself there where she could eavesdrop! But the defiant thought held scant comfort, since Cole's memory of that particular anathema was excellent; full-flavored round-up talk is not for the ears of women.

" Dorthy's father fixed us a bathhouse down below the spring, just the summer before he died," Mrs. Harris explained, to cover the confusion of her daughter's hurried retreat. " He always tried to save us steps, and packing water in here and heating it in the wash boiler made a lot of work — and water can't be piped into the house, because it's higher than the spring and we never have been able to afford a pump and tank. We put the house here on account of the shade. We couldn't

move the spring, and we couldn't move the grove, so we just had to take our choice and make the best of it.

"But since we've got the bathhouse fixed, it's real handy; only we haven't any way of heating the water yet, except building a fire under the tub. And we try and keep brush dragged up from the creek for it, but Dorothy has so *much* to do, riding and keeping up the fences, and looking after the stock and delivering butter to the ranches where we've got steady customers, that sometimes it's nip and tuck, whether we have wood for our bath-tub, or whether we don't."

"I thought — haven't you a man, Mrs. Harris? This Steve ——"

"Steve," she told him constrainedly, "is my stepson; Dorothy's father's boy by his first marriage. He don't seem to take after his father a bit. He ain't much help ——"

"Mother, why don't you tell the truth and be done with it?" Dorothy had returned, watery-eyed and with a huskiness in her voice, but with her disposition unimpaired, it seemed.

"Steve's worse than nobody at all. If he didn't hang around we'd hire somebody and

be done with it. As it is, we're always kidding ourselves along with the hope that Steve will come home sober, and will do a day's work maybe before he leaves again. He went off a week ago to get some part for the mower so he could cut the oats, and he isn't back yet and won't be back. I've got the team up, and I'll start in to-morrow on the oats, if I can make the mower work at all. They can't stand any longer, or they'll be too ripe for hay. If it was wheat," she added rather plaintively, " we could let them ripen and the chickens would have scratch feed all winter. But oats — and we need that hay. Steve knows all that just as well as we do."

" You can't stack them, Dorthy ——"

" I can too, if you'll drive the team and load."

Cole lifted his cup, took a swallow of coffee too hot for him and blinked as he set down the cup.

" I'll help you with the oats, Mrs. Harris. I'm not doing anything — I was going to look for a job just as soon as my horse gets well — that's why I was staying at that camp. One of my horses got hurt and couldn't travel. I — I'll be glad to help you out." He did

not look toward Dorothy at all. He did not want to think about her if he could help it. It was for the mother he was doing it — because she was sweet and reminded him of his own mother. In spite of the girl he would help the mother, and he hoped she would never know the effort it had cost him to make the offer.

"We couldn't pay any kind of wages, son." Impulsively Mrs. Harris reached out and laid her hand over Cole's fingers where they rested beside his coffee cup. "We'd have had a man hired long ago if we could afford it. But——"

"If Steve would let a man stay on the place, you mean," Dorothy interrupted her mother with angry impatience. "You know why we can't have a man, Mom. Steve would come home and raise Cain about it, and fire him, and storm and bully you about the expense, and then saddle his horse and go again. A man can't stay on the ranch, is why we don't have one."

"But we couldn't pay wages, Dorthy; you know we couldn't. With cattle so low this year we can't sell any, and we couldn't pay a man wages out of the butter money, and that's

about all we'll have to run on. I know Steve is real mean about our having any one around, but there's other reasons. So we thank you just the same, Cole, but we couldn't let you work here."

" I don't want wages, Mrs. Harris. I've been camping on your land ——" Cole gulped down his pride and stared hard at his plate.

" Why, that's all right! We don't care the least bit how long you stay. If Looey's camp is any use to you ——"

" Well, the time drags terribly with nothing to do. While my horse is getting well enough to travel, I could ride over mornings and help get the oats up — I'd like to do it, just for — just for pastime and — and to help you out." Cole looked at her shyly now, but he carefully refrained from looking at Dorothy.

" I appreciate — no, I don't believe we could let you do it, Cole. It's fine of you to want to, and Dorthy and I are just as grateful as we can be. But you see, Steve may be home any minute, and he expects to put up the hay. He wouldn't like it — he'd take it as a hint we don't want him here, if he should come

home and find we'd got somebody in his place. We'll try and get the oats cut ourselves — if the mower will run. I don't believe it will, till Steve brings back whatever he took to get fixed."

"Steve took the sickle bar," Dorothy informed her mother with a savage quality of calm; or as if a savage mood lay just beneath the calm. "I saw him ride off with it. I know why too — but I didn't like to say anything to worry you, Mom. There wasn't anything wrong with the sickle, except that it needed sharpening. He took it so the oats would spoil on the ground. I know it, now that he has stayed this long away. Before, I just suspected it, but now I know. Mommie, Steve wants to make us give up the ranch; you know that. He has been after you to leave him in charge, ever since Poppy died."

"I can't give up this place," Mrs. Harris said firmly. "Your father and I took it up as a homestead when we were first married. It's my home. I helped him clear it, burning the brush while he grubbed out the sage roots. I've seen it come out of wilderness foot by foot, almost. You were born in this room, Dorthy. Your father died in there in the bed-

room. I — why, I've heard every hammer blow that has ever been struck on this ranch, building one thing after another! Give it up to Steve? Indeed I sha'n't!"

"He'll starve us out if he can, Mom. He wants the ranch, and he doesn't want us here, and if we won't go he'll try and force us out. I'll cut those darned oats," she added fiercely, "if I have to do it with the shears! I'll show Steve!"

She would too, Cole thought to himself, as he remembered her inflexible temper where he himself was concerned. A girl that would make a fellow walk nine miles just because he had mistaken her for a horse thief, and would devil him all the way into the bargain, would certainly be capable of starting in on a field of oats with a pair of shears. Cole was human enough to grin, in spite of his intense dislike of her.

"Well, I would!" she reiterated, looking at him for the first time since their arrival.

"I bet you would," he assured her as briefly.

"Try some of this cream on your gingerbread, Cole," Mrs. Harris interposed, as if she feared an argument. "I want you to have

some, because I know you don't get it in camp and I never saw the boy that didn't like cream. I'll let you drag up some brush, after supper, if you will, but I don't feel as if I ought to ask you to help put up the hay. We can manage. Steve isn't quite as bad as Dorthy thinks. They don't get along together at all, and you can't expect her to see his virtues ——"

"His what, Mom?"

"There now, Dorthy, we won't argue about it. He's your own father's boy and as such he's got a home here as long as he wants it. Your father would do as much for mine, if I had a son and left him behind. I do draw the line at giving up the place to him entirely—your father would rise up in his grave if I should think of such a thing as giving up our home that we made together and lived on all these years. But we won't aggravate Steve any more than we can help, and I'm sure he's welcome whenever he rides in. It's his home as well as ours. We mustn't overlook that, Dorthy."

Dorothy did not reply to that, and a little silence ensued which Mrs. Harris finally broke with innocently unwelcome questions

concerning Cole's family and home; questions which he parried as well as he could, though he did talk a little of his mother because that subject seemed to bring him closer to the sweet woman who was so like her.

After supper Cole borrowed a saddle (it had belonged to Dorothy's father, Mrs. Harris told him with pathetic earnestness) and dragged dead wood up from the thicket along the creek. The much-prized bathhouse, he discovered, was a patched affair of board ends and canvas, which looked as if it might be the frazzled remnants of the original tent in which Mrs. Harris had spent her honeymoon. Water from the spring was piped to what suspiciously resembled a six-foot, galvanized iron watering trough with an outlet hole in one corner now plugged with a whittled block of wood. The place smelled of smoke, and the piece of canvas laid down for a rug was littered with ashes that had blown out from under the tub since the last firing.

Cole shook the canvas strip and spread it smoothly again upon the dirt floor, laid the wood ready for a match blaze and went out, futilely wishing that this sweet-faced mother might have the deserted bathroom at the C

Bar L. As to Dorothy, he considered that this crude makeshift was good enough for her; served her right, was his silent comment on the primitive arrangement as it concerned her.

"I'll come over in the morning and bring the saddle back, Mrs. Harris, and thank you for the supper," Cole said, looking down at her as she stood by the corral gate, her face shining palely in the dusk.

He did not say good night to Dorothy, who was walking away to the house as if the closing of the corral gate after his horses finished whatever business she had with him and she had no further interest in his existence.

Nevertheless the girl stopped inside the yard fence and watched him go, Johnnie setting the pace at a swift gallop, Mick and Hawk and Mutt loping along behind him, and the Wop trailing disgustedly after the party, his shaggy paunch swaying as he walked.

"He's a real nice boy, Dorthy," said Mrs. Harris coming up to where the girl stood staring into the dusk. "Why in the world you wanted to make him walk all the way

over here beats me! But I'm real glad he came. It did him good to have a regular meal of victuals. He misses his mother, I guess."

" His horses have all got blotched brands," Dorothy pointed out with pitiless meaning. " And you notice he didn't tell you where he's from. I wouldn't put myself out too much for him, Mom, if I were you. He's on the dodge, I'll bet on that."

" I don't care if he is," her mother retorted spiritedly. " He's been real well brought up, you can see that. And he spoke so nice about his mother."

" For heaven's sake, Mom! Jesse James had a mother, I suppose — and the chances are he loved her too. Did you notice his clothes, Mommy? *He's* no forty-dollar-a-month man, wearing those simple expensive things. You want to look out, I tell you. I know more about him than you do. If I'd been a man, he'd have killed me in cold blood! He's bad."

" I know better. No boy of his age with eyes like that and the upbringing he's had, can be so awful bad. He's no killer, if that's what you mean, nor a horse thief either. He's as nice, well-behaved a boy as I ever saw;

nice inside, too. You can't fool me, Dorthy. I looked right down into his eyes and saw what's behind them. I know."

"And I," said Dorothy flippantly, as she moved toward the house, "looked right down into his six-shooter and heard the bullet go through my hat. And I also heard words come out of that sweet boyish mouth that would shock you to death. You're so good yourself, Mom, anybody can fool you." She threw her arm around her mother's shoulders and the two walked up the path together.

"He's got Looey's cabin neat as wax," she added irrelevantly, "and his bed was made as smooth as a woman could do it, with the blankets all tucked in at the edges and the pillow plumped up — a white pillowslip, Mom — and *clean*. And he's got a guitar and some books. 'The Lays of Ancient Rome' was open on the bed, where he'd been reading it, and he had a Bible and 'Two Years Before the Mast,' and 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Little Men,' and 'Ivanhoe.' — and blotched brands and he's ready to shoot on sight."

"It all goes to prove that he comes from a good home," Mrs. Harris contended. "He's a nice boy, and I always will say so."

" It all goes to prove," said Dorothy, " that you can't most always tell. Bullets and blotched brands; they speak louder than books. You can think what you please, Mom, but I'm going to keep an eye on this new pet of yours. I wouldn't trust him out of my sight!"

All of which proves that Cole was nearly right; that you never can count on women, because they make their own laws.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"IT'S FUN, MOWING."

MOM'S new pet spent a restless night and was up at the first hint of dawn, with his breakfast eaten and his horse saddled, ready to fill a sack with grass gleaned down along the creek where it flowed out across the flat. He worked fast, pulling up everything that looked eatable for a horse, and so had the sack stuffed full and was galloping back to the corral before the upper edge of the sun had crept up into the warm blush of clouds over the hills to the east. He carried water and filled the zinc tub splashily, and he packed his more treasured belongings in the leather bag and hid it among the rocks above the spring, just in case some one else came meddling around the place while he was gone.

He was on his way to the Harris homestead before the sun had quite lost its deep orange glow. He had to return that saddle, remember; furthermore, he was worried about those oats. Steve, he had long ago decided, was a skunk. Worse than the girl, who

was plain ornery. But at least she did treat her mother fairly well, and seemed willing to do what she could to hold things together.

"A woman like Mrs. Harris has got no business working in a hayfield," Cole told himself more than once, to justify his interest in the work. "She'd have it to do, too. That darned girl couldn't fix a mower if she tried."

Riding as if fiends were after him, Cole covered the nine miles before the freshness was gone from the morning breeze. Mutt, galloping his best with the glare of determination in his eyes and his tongue hanging dry over his grinning teeth, was all of a mile behind when Cole swung off the sweating Johnnie at the corral gate and began uncinching the borrowed saddle on Mick.

As he carried it to its place on a peg at the far end of the stable, he saw that the work team was harnessed. Either Steve was back and ready to start work with the mower, or Dorothy was more hopeful of making repairs. Cole stopped outside the stable and looked around, trying to discover some clue to the motive behind that stabled team eating grain for their breakfast. Nothing was changed, no new saddle hung anywhere in sight to show

that the stepson had arrived. Cole guessed it was hope, and went over to the mower that stood with up-ended tongue beside the blacksmith shop.

It must be admitted that Cole's knowledge of farm machinery was sketchy and gleaned mostly from watching the ranch hands at work, but boys have a knack for picking up information, even at play. Cole had spent a good deal of time around the blacksmith shop at home, and he knew pretty well what he wanted now. That was a sickle bar with all its teeth sharpened ready to bite into the oat field; he did not really expect to find one, but he started in hunting as if he did. And such was his luck that in the blacksmith shop, standing in a corner behind the bench, he found an old sickle. Some of the teeth were gone, however, and what remained were dull and rusty. It did not look very promising but it was the best in sight and he laid it out on the work bench and went rummaging amongst the clutter of bolts, old clevises, nuts and all the odds and ends that any ranch may be expected to accumulate in twenty years of pinching economy. When he found a box with a dozen new sickle teeth and rivets, he

was as pleased as a boy over a nest of young mice; so pleased that he began to whistle as he laid them out on the bench and undertook the task of fitting them into place on the bar.

"Well! I thought Mom told you she didn't want any hired man!" Dorothy, attracted by the whistling, was standing in the doorway.

"She hasn't got any hired man," Cole interrupted his whistling long enough to retort, and went on with his work.

Dorothy looked at him, glanced back at the mower, looked again at Cole and walked away to the house.

"Mom, your Billy the Kid is here and has staked himself to the job of toggling up a sickle bar to mow the oats," she announced without preface. "That being the case, I may as well take the butter over to Miller's. That is, if you're going to be chicken-hearted and let him go to work when he knows we can't afford him."

"Why, he's just doing it as a favor, Dorothy! It's real kind of him; I wonder if he's had breakfast. Did you ask him?"

"Mom, do you realize what will happen if Steve comes and catches that fellow here?"

A sparkle came into the kindly eyes that sometimes looked a bit faded. Now they darkened until they were almost the color of Dorothy's, and hers were a deep, greenish hazel.

"What will happen will be that Steve will behave himself and mind his own business," her mother said tartly. "If this young man has a mind to help get the hay up, that lays between him and me and it's *nobody's* business. I'm running this ranch yet; at least, I think I am!"

"All right, but you better keep the shotgun handy to enforce your authority when Steve comes home," Dorothy grimly advised her.

"I thought you said Steve intends to spoil the hay crop," her mother reminded her shrewdly. "He ain't likely to come boiling back in time to do the work, if that's the game. You go right on and take the butter now, and I'll attend to Steve's case, Dorothy."

Dorothy looked as if she had some doubt of that, but she saddled her horse and presently rode away with ten pounds of butter nicely packed in white cloths wrung out of cold spring water, the whole tied in a sack

behind the cantle. And Cole, watching her departure from under his hat brim, heaved a sigh of relief and went off to the house for more explicit information regarding the oat field he had undertaken to harvest.

Mutt arrived and drank wearily from the spring creek, where a flock of tame ducks waddled and quacked, and afterwards flopped down in the shade where he could keep an eye on his master while he rested. There were no yelps or prancing left in Mutt this morning. He did not even get up to bark at the team and mower when Cole drove past him, but cocked one eyebrow in sardonic questioning and let them go. Cole, he observed in offended silence, did not even seem to know or care that he had come.

For the first time since the tragedy that had sent him drifting out into a world he distrusted, Cole Lawson was happy for a day. With his hat on the back of his head and his fine riding boots braced against the iron foot rest, he drove a rattly old mower round and round that five-acre field of oats and forgot the past from which he had fled. If the swaths he cut were scallopy at first and left thin strips of grain stalks standing, that was

a blemish soon erased from the work. Somehow he knew that the song of the old sickle made pleasant music for the sweet little old lady who hummed old-fashioned tunes as she worked in the house. Somehow he felt that here was work worth while, work he never would regret doing.

In mid-forenoon, when the mown grain lay drying in the sun and sending up a fragrance of harvest time, the little lady for whom he toiled came bringing him fresh buttermilk and gingerbread. Cole's grin was the kind the C Bar L had known.

"And I'm going to have fried chicken and doughnuts for dinner, and custard pie for supper," she told him smilingly. "You're making a real good job of it, Cole, and you don't know how thankful I am."

Cole swallowed the last of the gingerbread and brushed crumbs off his smile.

"It's fun, mowing. Beats setting around camp doing nothing. I wish there was more of this stuff to cut. I'm getting through too quick, is all I don't like about it."

"That sickle's pretty dull," she remarked. "Better bring it in with you at noon and we'll grind it. You know how, don't you?"

"Y-yes—or at least I can learn. I've watched 'em ground, anyway. But I never hung around Dad's hay crew much. I was always out with the boys, riding." It slipped out unguardedly. He bit his lip, hoping she would not notice.

If she did she gave no sign, and presently she went away and left him to his work. But now the sickle sang of long, hot afternoons at the C Bar L, when four mowers went steadily round and round the great Lawson meadows, one behind the other, making a strident chorus, while farther afield the patent stacker lifted a great load of timothy and clover high in air and tilted it down upon the stack, where men with forks plunged at the fragrant mass, shaping it, working furiously to be ready for the next load. Of wagons lumbering up, drawn by sleek giants of horses with arched necks and big, soft eyes. Of trooping groups of "hay diggers" coming in to dinner; strangers who drifted in to the ranch for work when haying began, sweated and toiled in the hayfields, straggled up to Cole Lawson's office at the house to get their pay, shouldered their strapped blanket rolls and caught a ride to town, drifting out again to no one

knows wnere until the next haying season.

He raised haunted eyes from the nodding grain that seemed to march up and trip suddenly upon the shuttling sickle knives, to lie prone and wilting in the sun. Here was no great, level expanse of hay to be garnered in long, loaf-shaped stacks, food for hundreds of hungry mouths. Here was a small, uneven patch of half-ripened grain, hemmed in by gravelly, sage-grown hills on one side, sloping down to the deep green of alfalfa in the flat where the creek could spread and water it. Twenty years in the growing, and the ranch no bigger now than the main line-camp of the C Bar L. A few horses, a few cattle, a few acres of uneven land, and two women to care for it and call it home! If his father, with hundreds of acres of hay and thousands of cattle, had failed and lost heart so that he could not face life any longer, what chance had these two women?

Cole turned back when he reached the edge of the field and drove an erratic course over the morning's mowing, gleaning the thin strips of grain he had missed between the swathes. After that, he was careful to drive straighter, to cut the last oat stalk that stood

on the edge of the sown ground, anxious that not one grain should be wasted. As he thought of the long, cold winter that would come, he wondered how many head of stock must be fed and tried to estimate how many tons of hay the crop would yield. If it were only a matter of riding or roping or trail drives, he would know better how to judge. He wished now that he had paid more attention to the ranch work. He could have learned a lot from Nels Peters, the ranch foreman. Instead of that he had looked upon Billy Parrish as the walking encyclopedia, and Billy Parrish had never tried to conceal his scorn for anything that required manual labor. Cole had not even known the names of the " hay diggers "; his interest in the work had consisted in riding down to watch the stacking crew now and then, or to galloping somewhere to deliver a message to some one.

" I'll bet you've turned grindstone times enough," Mrs. Harris bantered him when, after a most satisfying chicken dinner, she led him down toward the spring where the grindstone stood spraddled in the shade of a great cottonwood.

" Why, no. I guess the men did that with

their feet. Yes, I know they did, now. I've watched them, but not often." Cole was too full fed and contented to be on his guard.

"Your father had quite a large ranch, I s'pose."

"Why — pretty large, I guess."

"Oh, don't you remember?" She was looking at him now, but Cole busied himself with the sickle, avoiding her gaze.

"No. Too small. Kids forget."

Silence lay between them after that. Cole had lied to her and she knew it and was hurt. At first he resented the uneasy consciousness that he need not have lied; after a while he remembered how he had told her that morning that he had spent most of his time out on the range, riding. She would remember that, of course. She knew he had lied, that he was covering up his past from her friendly interest.

He had an impulse to tell her what it was he was hiding, but the stubborn streak that had sent him away from his friends held his tongue in leash. No. He had started out to bury the past and he would not dig it up now; not even for her. She would be just as kind if she knew, even kinder perhaps. But he

did not want to see in her eyes that she was thinking of it.

Somehow they got the sickle ground and Cole watered the horses and went back to work, and all through the rest of the cutting the sickle told him he lied, he lied, he lied.

Oh, well — it didn't amount to anything, anyway. She was an awfully nice woman, but she didn't have to know all his past life. Old ladies had no business to be so inquisitive, he told himself over and over. What difference did it make how big his father's ranch was? But in his heart he knew that the difference lay in the fact that he had lied, and that was all the difference in the world.

He did not stay for supper, but saddled Mick and went racing back to camp, Johnnie and Hawk galloping like wild horses behind him and Mutt straining every muscle to keep up. The reason he gave to himself for not staying for supper was because the girl was home and he did not want to see her or have anything to do with her. But that was not the real reason and he knew it just as well as Mrs. Harris knew why he would not stay.

The next day he did not go over there, but he watched the weather, afraid that it would

rain on the hay. On the day after that he rode over, found Dorothy in the field raking, and after an undecided five minutes while he sat on his horse and watched, unseen from the house because of the grove, he turned and rode back again. He was not needed, he said. But his spirits were heavy and he did not play the guitar that day or romp with Mutt, who watched him solicitously with wise, sad eyes and his head cocked sideways.

Once more Cole Lawson felt himself exiled from all he cared for in the world, an outcast who had himself closed the gate and could not go back. Once more he had no friends save his horses and the dog. The hand of fate was raised against him and there were none to care what became of him.

A morbid mood, probably caused by indigestion from eating too many warm doughnuts at a sitting — for Cole had managed to devour four that day of the mowing. But whatever created the mood, it was just as real to Cole as if the Harris door had been slammed in his face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MOTHER HARRIS ASSERTS HERSELF

"It's going to storm, Mommie, and we'll have to get that hay in, whether Billy the Kid ever shows up again or not; or Steve, either. Never mind the dishes, Mom, but get into some overalls and come drive the wagon for me. The churning will have to wait too. I wouldn't trust this weather overnight." Dorothy in her bib overalls reached for her bullet-scarred hat while she spoke.

"I'm afraid Cole must be sick," her mother said worriedly, getting up from the table and reaching for the butter and cream which must be carried into the milk house whether anything else were done or not. "I can't think what else would have kept him from coming to finish the hay."

"Sick nothing! Had to beat it out of the country, most likely, with some sheriff on his trail. I do wish you wouldn't try to mother everybody that comes within a mile of you, Mom. That's just what ails Steve; you've been so darned good to him, he thinks he owns

you body and soul. You never get any thanks for spreading your wings over everything you see. You know half the time you're hovering door knobs. Concentrate on your loving daughter, Mom. I sure will need a lot of hovering, if I pitch all that hay on to the wagon before it storms."

"I don't know as there's a pair of overalls that I can get into, Dorothy." Mrs. Harris plainly was accustomed to being lectured for her kindness of heart; at any rate she paid no attention to it now. "Steve wore that pair I bought for myself. They were hanging up in the stairway, and I guess he thought they belonged to him."

"As if he cared who they belonged to! Well, scare up something to put on. I don't want to worry about you tangled up in skirts on a load of hay, Mom. I'll go hitch up. And do leave the dishes alone and get ready! The house'll wait, but the hay won't."

That final admonition had the desired effect. Mrs. Harris went to the door and looked out at the brassy sky fringed on the western sky line with puffy white clouds, and decided that the hay was more important than the breakfast dishes, that day. She was ready

when Dorothy hooked the last tug and gathered up the lines.

"Good glory, Mom! Don't stoop over quick, or you'll pop your seams!" was her respectful greeting, when her mother came up and stood trying to decide where would be the easiest place to mount the hayrack. "Don't go in behind old Joe, Mom! He tried to lam me in the stable, just now. He's on the peck about something or other. Here, put that box down behind the rack, and I'll pull you up. Glory, Mom, but you're getting fat!"

"Shut up and mind your own business!" snapped her mother. "I guess I've got a right to what few pounds I own — there won't nobody try to steal 'em off me, anyway! I could just about skin Steve for taking them overalls! He must look like the old Harry in 'em. I got them overalls to fit *me.*"

"Those overalls, Mom. Glory, but you're getting careless. Fat and lazy — shame on you, old lady!"

"Shut up and give me *them* lines, before I slap you!"

"Say, you can't bully me, Mom — not in that outfit. You look exactly like a ginger-

bread man, Mommie. Where did you pick 'em?"

"None of your business. Give me them lines. If I'm going to drive, I'm going to *drive.*"

"Joe's got one of his mean spells, Mom. Better let me drive till he settles down, anyway. You can't trust a pinto when he rolls his eyes like that——"

"Teach your grandmother to skim milk! I drove horses — *pinto* horses, my lady — before you were born!" And Mommie, roused to that pitch of defiance which only a woman can attain who knows that she looks ridiculous, seized the lines and gave her daughter an elbow jab which set that young lady violently down upon the cracked plank which was built up over a rear wheel.

The plank creaked ominously and a pitchfork bounced and rang its tines as Mrs. Harris gathered up the slack in the lines and clucked to the team. Old Joe, the temperamental pinto with one "glass" eye and the tricky white eyelashes that went with it, reared straight up and gave a lunge forward. The driver gritted her teeth and thrust out her jaw to a fighting angle.

"You Joe! Behave yourself, now!" She swung the rein ends smartly down upon Joe's rump. "You'll get a good dressing down if you aren't careful! Joe! You mind what I tell you, now!"

Joe minded so much that he ducked to one side and forward, smashing a corner of the hayrack into the post as the team went tearing through the gate. Braced with her feet far apart and her eyes aglitter, Mrs. Harris swung the lines again and sawed against the bits. Team and wagon went larruping up past the house, the wheels bouncing over rocks and hummocks in a way that set the pitchforks dancing on the rack.

"Ma! You're ripping!" screamed Dorothy, hanging on grimly with both hands.

"I don't care if I am! I'll take the starch out of this da-mned — old ——"

Something shot by her, halting the unseasonable epithet at her clenched teeth. The pinto swung away, forcing old Bonnie into a grassy ditch that set the wagon perilously atilt. Then Cole's right hand had grasped Joe's bridle and he pulled them back. The wagon lurched back to level, Johnnie galloping alongside the recalcitrant pinto horse. A

remorseless drag at his head, a stiff-legged jump or two, and the team stopped.

"Good morning! Old Joe's feeling his oats to-day, I guess. We thought we'd get the hay hauled in before the weather changes. It looks like rain, don't you think, Cole?"

"Liable to storm, all right. I rode over to help. I'll be ready soon as I pull the saddle and shut these horses in the corral." Not for a thousand dollars would Cole have betrayed any doubt of her ability to handle old Joe. He turned and rode back toward the corral, and Mrs. Harris never suspected that he withdrew out of sight to watch her further progress toward the hayfield without embarrassment to her.

"Now, I call that manners!" she declared triumphantly to Dorothy as she drove on, Joe contenting himself with little prancing steps and an occasional baring of teeth to old Bonnie.

"Good thing you didn't turn your back to him, Mom. You better let me drive and load, now your pet outlaw is here to do the pitching. You'll have to cook dinner for him, I suppose — and Mom, you're all ripped up the back."

"I'm going to stay till he comes," her mother stubbornly decided. "I guess it won't be the first time he's seen torn overalls. I ain't going to trust you with this team while Joe's acting up. He'd run away with you and smash the wagon, like as not, and the hay would spoil while it was being fixed."

Dorothy laughed, and that settled it. The little old lady stuck to the job until dinner time, salving her pride though her vanity suffered.

But Cole saw only her courage and patience — her gameness, he called it to himself — and it never occurred to him that she made a ludicrous figure as she drove the wagon from haycock to haycock, expertly giving him the advantage of what little wind there was and never stopping too close or too far away. Cole needed all the advantages she could give him; he had never pitched hay before in his life.

Load by load the field was swept bare to the stubble. The light breeze died to infrequent puffs of heated air as if a furnace door was suddenly thrown open. On the ground, Cole lifted great forkfuls of crisp oat hay, poised the heavy mass, heaved it up on the

load where the girl caught it deftly with a fork, pushed it back with a spreading motion and waited, leaning on the pitchfork handle, while Cole raked the scattered wisps together into a pile and thrust in the fork. The load complete, Cole handed up his fork to Mrs. Harris, who knelt to reach the handle, then climbed up at the front of the rack — stepping behind Bonnie to do so — and lay panting and fanning himself with his big sombrero while she drove to the stack in the hay corral.

During these short trips Dorothy remained out of sight at the rear of the load where she need not speak to Cole nor he to her; tacit acknowledgment that the feud still flourished. When Mrs. Harris pulled in close alongside the stack, Dorothy would rise and throw her fork lancelike into the loose hay, following it with a sliding jump. Then Cole would pitch the hay off to her, it being supposed that this was harder work than stacking, though secretly he suspected that she was perhaps better qualified to shape a stack than he.

They lunched hastily off bread and milk and returned to the work, low mutterings in the west speeding their efforts to save the hay from a premature wetting. No one talked

much — the labor was too arduous, their muscles too little accustomed to the strain put upon them. Intervals of rest became shorter, for along toward the last the horses were urged into a straight-backed trot between field and hay corral.

The stack grew higher than the load of hay, and Mrs. Harris advised topping it off, even though some hay was left in the field. Dorothy did not think it was necessary, but the mother's judgment dominated after brief argument.

"You don't know weather like I do, Dorothy," she added to the decision, for good measure. "What hay is left over we can put in a pile and feed it out before it spoils; but I ain't going to have the whole stack soaked, and it will be if we fool around much longer."

Cole was glad. It seemed as though his back would snap in two if he had to pitch the hay an inch higher to meet Dorothy's poised and waiting fork, and to miss it, to fall short, would be an admission of failure he could not bear the thought of facing. No wonder patent stackers had been invented! He wished he had one now, and he felt a new and belated respect for the "hay diggers" he had

passed by so casually at home. Nels Peters would have told him how awkwardly he pitched and would have shown him how much easier it could be done; but the women did not know he was doubling his labor, and Cole went on lifting and heaving while the blisters broke on his palms and wore the flesh raw against his riding gloves, and the muttering grew louder and nearer and more ominous as the thunderheads rolled up from the west.

Under the older woman's direction the stack drew in at the top, tapering to a peak from both sides. She had miscalculated, it seemed, both the amount of hay left in the field and the imminence of the storm, for the peak went higher and higher until Dorothy had scant room to work and Cole stood on his toes and jumped to send each forkful farther, and still the thunder held itself down to an aloof grumbling.

They were working to get the last load on the stack and put the weighted pole in place to hold it down. Cole was doing his weary best, savagely determined that the taunting look on Dorothy's face when she looked down at him should have no reason to express itself in words. So far he had sent every fork-

ful within her reach — she would have to admit that much, at least.

There was one more, and she was waiting for it, crouched on one knee, the sarcastic smile he hated on her lips. Cole raked the hay together on the floor of the rack, thrust his fork deep, braced himself and lifted, the cords standing out red on his neck with the exertion. He wondered if he could make it, and his back stiffened at the doubt. Higher and higher he elevated it, gathered all his strength for the final heave and went up on his toes just as a blast of wind caught the hay and twisted it, fork and all, from his grasp.

Cole had been caught off his balance with his muscles straining for that final heaving motion. He went down with the hay. When he got up it was slowly, by painful degrees, with his head tilted sidewise because it was excruciatingly painful to move it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOHN ROPER AGAIN

COLE could not remember how he came to be in the house, lying on a bed with the pungent odor of liniment pervading the air. He heard the patter of rain against a window, the steady beat of a storm that has passed its first fury and is now calmly drenching the land. This was strange, because he had a clear recollection of the sudden gust of wind that caught the forkful of hay, and he recalled the twisting pain when he went down with his burden. But he also remembered getting up — or starting to get up. There seemed to be a distinct break in events from there on. It was like a dream which fails to preserve the continuity of events; he crawled to his knees on the hayrack — and found himself lying on a bed in the house with rain and twilight and the smell of liniment.

He tried to get up and discovered that he could not move; a burning sensation in his shoulder and the excruciating pain of wrenched muscles brought beads of sweat to

his forehead when he made the attempt. He was aware of some one in the room, and Mrs. Harris bent over him solicitously.

"Now, you lay right still," she commanded him. "It isn't anything but a wrenched back, or maybe it's up in the cords of your neck and shoulder. The same thing happened to Dorthy's father once, and laid him up for a few days, so I knew right away what had happened to you. I'll fix a poultice of hops and vinegar, and that will take out the soreness right away. And after a while, when you feel a little more like being mauled around, I'll massage it for you; maybe I can hit the spot that's kinked, and straighten it out all right."

Cole bit his lip, ashamed of the mishap. He did not want her to wait on him and he was sure that in a little while he could get up and go saddle his horse and ride to camp. He couldn't leave Eagle shut up in the corral over there without water or feed; he'd go, if he had to crawl. Of course, women liked to fuss over a fellow — his mother had always been like that; but he was a man now, and he wasn't going to be babied.

For the present, however, he let her fuss, since she insisted upon it. She brought him

toast and tea to begin with, then hops and vinegar in a poultice so hot she could scarcely hold it, and finally, when the poultice had subsided a bit so that he could bear the heat of it without wanting to yell, she helped him turn over on his side and set to work massaging; a "by-guess-and-by-gosh" manipulation inspired by the hope of hitting the spot where lay the mischief. Cole gritted his teeth and endured it silently, and afterwards was advised to sleep if he could.

Perhaps he did sleep, though he had intended to make another attempt to get up and go home. At any rate, he roused himself after another hazy period of time and saw that the room was dark and that the rain had subsided to an intermittent drip, drip, which lulled his senses to a drowsy quiescence bordering on dreams.

Now he was aware of a man's voice in the next room; the kitchen, he guessed it to be, since the smell of coffee seeped in through the space under the closed door where lamplight glowed yellow on the floor. Steve had come home, then. There would be a row, he supposed, when Steve discovered a strange man in the house. Then, without wanting to

listen, he heard Mrs. Harris speak in a sharp, worried tone.

"I don't see how in the world Steve expects me to raise any fifty dollars for him. If he don't want it bad enough to come after it — and anyway, I haven't got that much."

"As I said, Steve can't come himself or he would. He's laid up in the hospital and he sure needs the money bad, Mis' Harris. When a man's shot through and through ——"

"Shot? You didn't tell me he was shot! What was it? — Some drunken brawl or other, I suppose."

There was a slight rasping sound, the whispery clearing of a man's throat. Cole's nerves tingled with recognition; Roper, beyond a doubt, here in the house of this sweet old lady; apparently on friendly terms with her at that.

"No, no, Steve wasn't drinking at all, Mis' Harris. It happened on the trail, in the dark; the trail over to Catrock. Him and a couple of the boys was ridin' along and they met a fellow that started in shootin' the minute he seen 'em. No provocation — he just shot on sight, b'fore they suspicioned what he was up to."

"For pity sake! They must have known who he was; must have been some old trouble Steve's been into."

"No, nothin' like that at all. Course, it was dark and they couldn't see his face, but from the description it was a feller that has been hidin' out somewheres in the country. Wanted for somethin' on the outside and come up in here on the dodge. Saw 'im m'self, couple of days before he got Steve. Travelin' with four horses — four good-lookin' bays. Every one of 'em has got blotched brands. Stole 'em somewhere, uh course.

"So, Steve bein' shot and in the hospital, he thought mebby you might strain a point and let 'im have a little money till he gits on his feet again. I let 'im have all I could spare, but with cattle a drug on the market and horses worth just nothin' at all, I got about all I can do to keep my head above water, m'self. *Ahem-m.* He thought he could git by with fifty dollars, mebby. Bein' flat on his back is purty tough this time of year. Shuts 'im outa gittin' a job on round-up, and Steve's been plannin' on a job, to help you folks out."

"If he'd been helping us out at home here, where he's needed," spoke up Dorothy's clear, uncompromising voice, "he wouldn't have been shot."

"Now, now, there ain't no tellin'. Feller like that loose in the country, a man ain't safe in his own dooryard. Steve never brought it on 'imself, and I don't see how anybody can blame 'im."

"It don't sound logical to me," Mrs. Harris objected. "Steve must have done something."

"Not a thing more 'n to be ridin' along the trail. A feller that's wanted for murder, say, ain't goin' to ask no questions. He thought it was a possy, most likely; three men together like that made him think they was closin' in on 'im. Started right in shootin', first thing. The boys was goin' to take in after him, but Steve fell off his horse and they had to look after him first, so the outlaw got away. You folks want to be on the lookout, and don't take no chances. Now, about that money — Steve sure needs help right now, and he needs it bad. Hospitals cost money, and the boys 've chipped in all they can stand right now."

"I've got to buy hay to winter on," Mrs.

Harris worriedly explained. "We couldn't get in enough last spring to see us through, and Steve hasn't been any help at all. I'm sorry he's hurt, and I'd be glad to do anything I could; but if you can't, you can't, and that's all there is to it. I've got to go in debt for hay to feed my milch cows through till grass grows in the spring. I depend on my cows for a living, while stock is so low. You tell Steve I've let him have all the money I can, and from now on he'll have to look after himself. I'm sorry, but Dorthy and I have got pretty hard scratching ourselves."

Apparently that was the final word, though Cole's turbulent thoughts effectually closed his ears to comprehension of what followed. He wanted to go out there and tell Roper to his face what he thought of him, and denounce the man to these women who spoke to him as to a friend, even though his plea for Steve must prove a failure. Certainly they did not question the truth of Roper's statements. They accepted the fact of Steve's injury and the circumstances under which he had received it, even though they could not fail to recognize Roper's description of the man who did it. But he was powerless to move or to

defend himself from Roper, and common sense bade him hold his tongue for the present. He had no proof to bring forward to substantiate his accusations; whereas Roper could point to Cole's horses and say that here was evidence that he told the truth.

Well, the brands were blotched; Cole could not deny that fact, even if he wanted to. They were his horses and he had a right to blotch their brands if he wanted to, though now he was forced to admit to himself that it was an unusual thing to do and that his right might be questioned. But above the spirit of self-justification which rose up in his defense, cold rage against this Judas of the range flowed strong and with a driving urge toward action of some sort. He did not know what kind of action; all he knew was that he couldn't and wouldn't let Roper get away with the lie.

For the time being at least, mind dominated matter and Cole rose up from the bed and stood in the dark of the room, trying to decide what would be the better course; walk in there and call Roper the liar and thief he was, or wait for him outside. At first his impulse was to walk into the kitchen and have the

thing over with, but then he thought of the two women and the scene which must follow his appearance. It would be too stagey; also it might be more before they were through with each other, and he was in no condition for a fight just now.

He reached up a hand and felt of his neck, which still had a kink in it that prevented the straightening of his head. The breath-taking pain between his shoulders had subsided to a soreness, however, and he felt that he could walk well enough if he were careful not to bend or thrust his arms forward suddenly. No, he certainly was in no condition for a fight, but he could not stay cooped in that room doing nothing. He would get outside and wait for Roper, and — he did not know what he would do then, but he made sure of his gun, which he had tucked inside his waistband that morning when he prepared to pitch hay. At any rate, it was his left shoulder that was sprained, the left side of his neck that was drawn and stiff.

All this he thought while he was feeling his way carefully along the foot of the bed toward the window. He remembered a door in that corner of the room, and now he won-

dered if it had squeaky hinges. He hoped not, and in another minute he had put his hope to the test and had it fulfilled. Of course, the women would not tolerate a squeaky door, he reflected, as he turned the knob slowly and pulled the door open.

Outside the night air was fresh and cool, with a breeze that rustled the damp leaves of the cottonwoods and flung cool drops of water into his face. They fell gratefully on his hot skin and the refreshing shock of their impact helped to clear his mind of fevered impulses toward inconsidered action. He made his way slowly down the path to the milk house, since he had emerged from the side of the house and the path led that way. He thought he would wait there until Roper came out and then — confront him and make him admit he lied, and force him to go back and tell Mrs. Harris so? He might better have walked out into the kitchen, if that were his intention.

No, he did not know what he meant to do or what he could do. Cole was not the stuff of which killers are made and he had no thought of shooting Roper, as some men might have done.

As it happened, the restrictions of his sprained shoulder saved him from headlong action that would have been foolish in the extreme. The kitchen door opened and John Roper stepped out to stand on the doorstep for a last word or two, with Mrs. Harris framed in the yellow light which shone from the room behind her. The light shone full on Roper's face, showing the long upper lip and the humorous pucker of his lips. And while her face was in the shadow, Cole got the impression of worry beyond anything he had seen her indulge in before; perhaps it was her voice that held it.

"Well, you tell Steve I'm sorry, but I can't do a thing. I haven't got that much money to my name, right now. The County will take care of him till he's out of the hospital, I suppose — I don't know of any other way. I hate to think it's come to that, but there isn't anything I can do." Her hand was on the door, slowly pushing it shut as if she were anxious to terminate an unpleasant conversation.

"Well, I'll tell him what you said, Mis' Harris. He'll be more worried about you than about himself, I guess. Well — good

evening." Roper stepped down and walked away.

The door closed with a definite little bang as Roper went past the milk house, clearing his throat with that little rasping sound Cole had come to know so well.

Cole stepped forward, his mouth open to call Roper's name, but the careless movement of his body brought instant and painful reminder of his hurt. A man with a stiff neck tilted sidewise like a meditative crow cannot take issue with his enemy without knowing all the odds to his foe, as Cole was forced to realize while he waited for the pain to subside. When he was finally able to go on, walking slowly to lessen the jar that went stabbing along his nerves, Roper was mounting his horse. Cole reached the gate just in time to see him ride off, a blurred figure that presently merged with the shadows behind the stable. Suffering, almost desperate, he could only watch in silence, hiding there because of his hurt.

Even a man with long years of experience behind him would have found the situation intolerable; to Cole it was unthinkable that Roper should ride away and leave those lies

behind him to rankle in the minds of the women; to go back and accept the further shelter and kindness of those who thought him a thief and a murderer was even worse, and Cole set his teeth and started for the corral. In spite of the pain, he meant to ride back to camp that night. He would not explain or argue or apologize. He would let them think what they pleased about him. The world was big and there was a lot of it he had yet to see; too much to make it necessary for him to stay here, where they had listened to Roper and had spoken no word in his defense.

That to speak in his favor would merely acknowledge the fact that he had been there at the ranch and perhaps would furnish a clue to Roper, did not occur to Cole in his frenzy of outraged pride at the slander. He did not feel the need of protection from Roper, except that he had not thought it wise to challenge the man openly while he was helpless to wreak the vengeance Roper deserved. And the fact that he had shot Steve Harris that night did not weigh very heavily upon his conscience, though he now saw that the three men had probably known nothing whatever of Roper's sinister purpose. They had tried to

stop him, and he had been one against three. As he saw it then, his mistake had been natural and justifiable. He was sorry he had shot Steve, but he did not see how any reasonable person could blame him.

Like a wounded wolf, he wanted now to crawl off to his own camp and lie there until he was able to hold his own against Roper and his gang. Eagle, too, must be watered and fed; he could not be left shut up in that small corral. He would manage somehow to get to camp, and folks had better leave him alone until he was on his feet again. Then he would fight it out with them. If they were bound to give him the name of an outlaw, maybe he would take the game too. He surely wouldn't back down from anybody, from now on.

He was fumbling with the gate, trying to lift it free of the ground and swing it open, when quick, determined footsteps came down the path from the house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COLE AN OUTLAW?

"HERE! I thought you were laid out and couldn't walk!" Dorothy exclaimed petulantly as she came up and, reaching past him, calmly pushed the gate shut again and fastened it. "Mom is boss of this ranch, and she says you are not going anywhere to-night except to bed. What in the world ails you, anyway?"

"What do you suppose?" Cole was not breathing evenly because of the pain, and the words had a jerky, desperate sound. "You folks can believe all that devil tells you, if you like. He lied, and I could have proved it if you had come a little sooner. Your precious Steve was waiting down here for him to bring the money——"

"You're crazy!" Which from Dorothy meant merely that she was much surprised.

"Oh, all right. Get away — from that gate! I'm — going — to camp."

"You're going to bed. How are you going to throw a saddle on your horse?"

"I'll ride — bareback. Walk — crawl ——" Any one who has ever suffered from a sprained shoulder will understand why Cole broke off suddenly in his declaration of independence. He had forgotten and made the wrong kind of movement, that awakened the devil of pain again. A groan slipped out between his clenched teeth before he could stop it. He stood with eyes tightly shut and waited until the paroxysm passed, and so did not realize that the girl had left him until he heard her coming back with her mother, the two talking together in hurried, disjointed sentences. And he had wanted to slip away quietly without any wordy explanations, any attempt to justify himself in their eyes! They would not have it so.

"For pity's sake, Cole, don't be silly! You can't ride, with that crick in your back, and you know it as well as I do. You couldn't get on your horse, let alone stand the jolting. You come right back to bed, young man. John's gone, and there won't anybody come looking for you — to-night, anyway. Why, I wouldn't think of letting you go back to camp to-night! I wouldn't treat a lame dog that way ——"

An unfortunate speech, which she realized too late. Cole turned — not quickly or easily, but with stiff, mechanical movement of body and head together, like a wooden doll. His words poured forth in a torrent of resentment.

"That's why I won't stay here. You'd doctor me like a sick dog. You think I'm dodging the sheriff, just because that old horse thief told you so. You take his word for everything without even waiting to find out whether it's true or not. You think, because I marked out the brand on my horses, I must have stole them. You seem to think I'm going because I'm scared! If I was able to take the trail, I'd be after that horse thief and murderer of a John Roper and have it out with him ——"

"Why, Cole, John Roper ain't any horse thief; he's got a ranch over beyond Catrock. He's related by marriage ——"

"I don't care who he's related to!" Cole hotly interrupted her. "He hired me to work for him and then schemed to kill me so he could get my horses and outfit. If that don't make him out a horse thief and murderer, what does? He didn't get away with it, but

that sure wasn't his fault. And then I heard him tell you ——"

"There, now, never mind what he told me. You come right on back to the house where you belong." Mother Harris laid a hand on his arm, gently impelling him toward the gate of the yard.

"No, I can say all I've got to say right here! You may think he's an honest rancher, but I happen to know ——"

"Listen!" Dorothy flung up a hand for silence.

Down in the pasture below the corral there sounded the trampling of hoofs, as of horses running in sudden alarm. The noise grew louder and nearer, receded and for a moment ceased altogether. Then came a splashing in the creek, muffled thuds as the horses struck the sand on the farther bank, and afterwards silence.

"Stole your horses, I'll bet," Cole grimly declared.

"Pshaw! John Roper has been here plenty of times and nothing was lost," Mrs. Harris tartly rebuked him. "Something scared 'em, I guess; a coyote, maybe. You come on up to the house, Cole. In the morning, if you're

well enough to ride, you can go; but not tonight. I wouldn't think of letting you tackle it. Anyway, you don't want to go off without your hat and coat, I guess. They're in the kitchen, and nobody's going to pack 'em down here to you."

Reluctant, a bit sullen over her tacit acceptance of his guilt and the humiliation of being unable to disprove Roper's story, Cole walked slowly up the path with the two women. After all, she was right in one respect at least; he was in no condition to attempt the nine-mile journey to camp that night.

"Now," Mrs. Harris began with gentle firmness, when she had helped him ease down into a chair in the kitchen, "let's get the straight of this thing and have it over with. Cole, did you shoot Steve?" She saw him hesitate and a shadow passed over her face. "We might just as well have a thorough understanding of how things are," she added gravely. "You needn't be afraid of us, Cole. Dorthy and I appreciate your kindness about the hay and we'll do whatever we can to help you, short of breaking the law ourselves. I wish you'd just tell me all about it."

Baffled and defiant, Cole looked up at her; obliquely, because he could not move his head.

"What's the use? You take it for granted I'm all John Roper says I am. You think I'm hiding out from the law, so ——"

"I don't care so much about that, Cole. But John described you and your horses, and he says you shot Steve over on the trail to Catrock. Did you do that?"

Cole stared down at the floor, hesitating over his reply. A guilty man might have looked as he did, and he felt it and added that detail to the sum total of his resentment against the situation Roper had placed him in.

"I don't know. I was coming out of the Sinks, getting away from Roper. I knew he was after me and had his men out looking for me, and when I thought I was about safe, three fellows came riding down the ridge, and they tried to stop me. I wasn't stoppable, that's all. I fired a few shots, and so did they, but I didn't know I hit anybody till I heard Roper telling you about it. They shot my horse, Eagle, in the shoulder. That's why I had to lay up at that deserted camp — because Eagle couldn't travel. They got me in

the wrist too, but it didn't amount to much; just went through the edge and never hit a bone." Awkwardly, because of his restricted movements, he turned back the cuff of his sleeve and showed her the new scar.

"So you think maybe you did shoot Steve?" Mother Harris sat down in an old cane rocker and began to rock gently, watching Cole with the commiserating interest of one who learns of the wrongdoing of a friend and is sorry.

"Yes — but I thought he was one of the Roper gang and was trying to get me." In spite of himself, Cole found that he was making excuses and trying to explain — which he had firmly decided he would not do.

"John Roper hasn't any gang," she gently corrected him. "I can't understand your saying he's a horse thief and wanted to kill you. There's some mistake about that, Cole. John Roper's all right, far as I ever heard, and I've been in the country longer than he has. I don't believe you could get any one to agree with you, so I wouldn't tell that if I were you, Cole."

"It's the truth, whether anybody believes it or not," Cole stubbornly replied. "Some

day you'll find it out for yourself; maybe in the morning, from the sounds down in the pasture. If I could ride, I'd go see if your horses are all right. I *know* Roper's a horse thief. He was after my horses — but he lost out, that time." He glanced sidelong at Dorothy. "She better saddle up and go see if the horses are all right," he added gruffly. "She can use my horse, Johnnie; the one I ride most of the time. He's gentle."

"Does he think I can't ride anything but crowbaits?" Dorothy demanded, ignoring Cole as pointedly as he had avoided speaking directly to her. "John Roper would know better than to run our horses off, even if he wanted to and was that kind of a man. I'm surely not going to blunder around in the dark on any wild-goose chase."

"If you knew Roper as well as I know him, you wouldn't take a chance," Cole retorted, looking toward Mother Harris. "It's none of my business, but I hate to see anybody swallow the smooth kinda talk that guy hands out. He's sure a Judas if there ever was one."

"He wouldn't steal from us, even if he was that kind of a man, as Dorthy says. Cole, I want to know the truth. Are you on the dodge

for something you've done or are accused of doing? I ain't asking to be inquisitive — it's best to know the truth, so we'll be prepared in case somebody comes here looking for you."

"That ain't likely to happen," Cole replied. "Anyway, I won't be here. I don't stay where my word is doubted."

Mrs. Harris made a little clucking sound as if she felt her helplessness before his evasions.

"I wish you'd tell me where you're from, and what made you leave home."

Cole could not shake his head, but he closed his lips in stubborn silence. Tell why he left home, and have Dorothy's sharp tongue make a bitter mock of his trouble? Not if his life depended on it! He much preferred to let her believe him a dangerous outlaw; at least, she would fear to crowd his temper too far, he thought. She would know that he was not to be trifled with; the way he had sent that bullet through her hat would prove that he was a man who could and would make war on any one who showed himself an enemy, and though she might hate him she could not despise him — as she would be sure to do if she knew the sordid facts.

And as if she had read a part of the thoughts shuttling through his mind, Dorothy straightway demonstrated how little she feared him.

"Of course, he won't tell you why he left home. You shouldn't expect that, Mom. I suppose he thinks we're afraid of him, with that murderous scowl on his face. But nobody cares how many notches he has on his gun, or who he's planning to bump off next."

"Dorthy! Shame on you, deviling the boy when he's hurt and can't fight back!"

"Oh, I can fight back, any time I want to," Cole glowered. "I haven't so many notches on my gun but what there's room for one more, anyway."

"Meaning me?" Dorothy looked straight at him, and the imp of mischief was in her eyes. "I thought you said once you couldn't shoot a woman."

"A fellow can always change his mind," Cole retorted. "But it happens that I meant Roper."

"My conscience, I wish you two would stop wrangling! Cole, you better go to bed and let me rub your shoulder again with Three H. You can't expect to do anything very

bloodthirsty while you're going around with a kinked neck, so the sooner you get over it, the quicker you can start in being bad."

Cole sent her a suspicious, sidelong glance. The ironical note in her voice seemed to imply that she did not after all consider him altogether inimical to the peace and well-being of his fellow men, but her eyes met his innocently enough. Then she laughed a little, and Cole's mouth relaxed to a sheepish grin.

"I'm not bloodthirsty and I'm not bad when I'm left alone," he blurted impulsively, instantly disarmed by her silent acceptance of his sincerity. "I marked out the brands on my horses because I wanted to, but they're mine just the same. If I shot anybody, I sure didn't know it, but I wasn't going to let Roper get hold of me if I could help it, and I don't see what I could do but fight back. I don't back down an inch from Roper or anybody else, but as you say, a fellow with a kinked neck hasn't any business to go on the warpath."

"Well, we'll let things stand that way," Mother Harris agreed, with a sigh of relief. "I can't hardly believe you're an outlaw ——"

"With that dimple in his chin? Well, hardly!"

"Dorthy, you stop pestering him! No matter who you are or what you've done or ain't done, Cole, you're going right straight to bed, and let me give that neck and shoulder another good rubbing with liniment."

And Cole, because she had a look and a way that reminded him of his mother, did as he was told.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STEVE HARRIS

FOR days the kitchen and little side bedroom were odorous of liniment, and Cole Lawson of the tarnished reputation moved as if he were strapped to a board. His eyeballs were sore from rolling unnaturally so that he could look up under his brows or obliquely to one side or the other, and his face wore a permanent scowl. Had he broken a leg or been shot through the middle he could not have been more uncomfortable, and he would have felt that at least his injury was one to command respect, but a crick in the neck merely gave him the ludicrous appearance of a wise old crow perched somewhere with a speculative eye upon a cornfield. He tried to dismiss the ailment as a matter of no moment, but it would not be ignored; and though he reeked of liniment and hops steeped in vinegar, the strained tendons remained obdurate, protesting against movement with agonizing, white-hot streaks of

pain that gave him long moments of nausea. As for riding that was simply out of the question.

"Never mind, Cole, it'll quit just as sudden as it started in," Mother Harris reiterated comfortingly, but she neglected to set any time for the miracle of recovery and Cole was not cheered.

"We had a horse with a kinked neck once," Dorothy volunteered for his information. "Glory, he was like a comic valentine! Don't you remember, Mom? We turned him out to pasture and he was that way all summer. He had to kneel down to eat grass, and just as the kink began to ease up so he could move his head a little, he up and died of starvation or something. He was so skinny the coyotes wouldn't look at him. They thought he was a last year's carcass."

"Dorthy! What makes you act so? You know better than that. Old Jerry died of something else."

"Well, Billy the Kid isn't likely to starve, at any rate; not unless he gets a crick in his elbow."

She called him that to his face now, and wordy wars waged fiercely over Mother

Harris' head, in spite of her expostulations that were more than half sincere.

"You don't want to take Dorthy at her word, Cole," she told him, after three days of mental and physical torment. "She just does it to tease, more 'n anything else. You been worrying about your sick horse over at Looey's camp, and she'd die, I expect, before she'd tell you she's been riding over there every day and packing hay to him. She says he's pickin' up real fast too, on them oats, and to-day she's going to try and get him over here for a su'prise when you're able to ride. But don't let on I told you, Cole. Just let her think you don't suspicion a thing about it. She'd be awful mad if she found out I'd put you next — but girls don't realize how a young fellow feels about his horses. Like a cat with a mouse; they don't mean nothing much by it, but it hurts just the same."

Naturally, that helped Cole considerably in his feelings toward Dorothy, but his manner did not change and her bullying continued without respite. Cole used to sit with the hop poultices bound on the back of his neck and the vinegar trickling down his spine, and ponder over Dorothy's briary manner toward

him. Not that it mattered in the least; but no girl had ever treated him like that, and he wondered why she held the grudge so inflexibly against him. Surely, he thought again and again, she had paid him off that first day for the mistake he had made in trying to shoot her. She knew he thought she was trying to steal his horses, and she must know he had every reason for thinking so.

Did she treat him so because she believed him an outlaw — because he had inadvertently wounded her stepbrother? Cole did not quite believe that. Dorothy had not shown any love for Steve, and she did not betray any great sympathy for him now. She had remarked to her mother, in Cole's hearing, that Steve had it coming to him — but whether she referred to the shooting or to the financial embarrassment, Cole did not know. And why, if she really felt a deep and lasting contempt for Cole as an outlaw, did she openly gibe at him and call him Billy the Kid? Outlaws weren't bantered in that way. At least Cole had never heard of one that was.

He was sitting in the kitchen staring intently at a knot in the floor while Mother Harris varied her poultice treatment with a

liniment massage, when the door opened and a man walked in without ceremony. Cole could not lift his head, but he saw the fellow's run-over boots and the big-roweled spurs with worn straps stamped with a horse's head. The rowels were clotted with blood and hair, and Cole's gorge rose at the telltale sign. No cowpuncher on the C Bar L would have lasted long on the payroll after spurs in that condition were seen on his heels. They reminded Cole of a certain rider who had been given his time and a thrashing for good measure for showing spurs less stained than these.

"Why — hello, Steve!" Mother Harris's fingers tightened unconsciously on Cole's neck in a way that brought a grunt of pain. She never noticed it. That, to Cole, meant more than tears.

"I — I thought you was sick in the hospital," she wavered, after a two-second silence. "John Roper ——"

"Yeah, and a hell of a lot you cared whether I died or not! I coulda rotted, for all you. I was broke and sick and you ——"

"You got well mighty fast, seems to me," Mother Harris said pointedly, gathering her courage together. "There, I guess that'll do

now, Cole. You better go back and lie down a while and let the liniment soak in before I put on another poultice."

Cole knew he was dismissed from what promised to be a family row. He went, because he was useless as a protector — granted she needed protection from her own stepson — and his presence could only mean embarrassment.

"Who the devil's that?" Steve demanded, before Cole had the bedroom door closed. "Cole, eh? Fellow that put a bullet through me, I'll bet! And you're harborin' him, eh? And you wouldn't send me a red cent when I needed it, you ——"

"Now, Steve, look here! Don't you go callin' names, or I'll tell you a few things you won't like to hear. You sent word out here you wanted fifty dollars and you had to have it, and I sent word back that I didn't have it. You know I didn't, and *you know why*. I didn't have it, because you took every cent I had in the house when you went off with the sickle bar ——"

"I never took what you got buried! You think I ain't wise to you ——"

"What I've got buried!" Her voice rose

with the bitterness welling up within her at the charge. "What I've got buried is a husband and a son, Steve Harris, that would kick you off this ranch for the way you've acted since your father died. What I've got buried! I wish to God I *could* call them back!"

"Yeah — you can ying-yang about the son that's dead, and let the one that's livin' lay and starve, for all you care! You can harbor that damn skunk that shot me ——"

"He couldn't have shot you very bad, Steve, the way you hit for home the minute you found out you wouldn't get any money out of me. John said you was flat on your back in the hospital and was going to have an operation. That was four days ago, and here you are, looking just as hearty and strong as if you'd never been sick! I don't believe you was so much as scratched! You just put up a pitiful story to try and get more money outa me!"

"There! What do yuh call that, then?" Steve twitched his neckerchief loose and showed a purplish red scar on the fleshy side of his neck.

"Hm-mm! Laid you out, did it? Maybe it did for a minute or two, but it never put you in the hospital overnight. You can't pull

the wool over my eyes that way, Steve Harris. I knew there was a false ring to John Roper's talk, and I'm su'prised that he should come here and lie for you."

"He didn't lie. I need fifty dollars, and I'm goin' to have it too."

"I'd like to know how you're going to get it, Steve, after robbing me of what I had saved up to buy hay for winter. You went off with over seventy-five dollars of my money. I ain't told Dorthy yet——"

"Well, why don't you? It was my money, same as this ranch is mine. I got the same right here that you have. You claim the hull works — the ranch, and every damn thing on it. I'm here to tell yuh I ain't goin' to stand for much more. I'm goin' to get mad some of these days, and then you'll see the fur fly!"

"Something else is goin' to fly before then, Steve Harris, and that's you. I never thought the day would come when I'd turn against one of Dorthy's father's flesh and blood, but if he was standin' here in this kitchen right this minute, he'd say it for me, and back up his words with a gun, if necessary. You leave this house and this ranch, Steve Harris, and don't you ever darken my door again!"

"Aw, to hell with you and your door!" Before her righteous wrath Steve quailed, nevertheless, and went out and slammed the door with such savage violence that the whole house shook.

She stood at the window and watched him go, her vision blurred with tears at the tragedy of having to drive from the house her beloved mate's own son, for whom he had planned and worked in the full hope that Steve would be a comfort in their old age. A comfort! She wiped her eyes and turned away to fix the poultice for Cole's neck, and saw him standing in the doorway, looking at her with big, somber eyes that at last had lost their veil of aloofness and distrust.

"Don't you worry about the money, or Steve either," he said, as he shuffled over to lay a comforting arm across her shoulder. "I've got some you can use to buy hay with. I wanted to do it anyway, for the way you've doctored me and fussed over me. And I'll help you with the work, just as soon as this darn kink gets straightened out of my neck. Let Steve go, and forget about him. We'll make out all right — and you needn't worry about the wages, either. I haven't got a soul

in the world but myself and my horses to look after — and Mutt, if he sticks with me — and I'd be tickled to death to help you get ready for winter."

Mother Harris looked up at him, blinked and tried to smile — and all at once she found herself crying with her face against Cole's well shoulder and Cole's hand patting her on the back.

They were standing so when Dorothy walked into the kitchen, with her quirt dangling on her wrist and her big sombrero swinging by its rubber band. Dorothy stopped and stared.

"Well! Shoot the daughter and make love to the old lady!" she commented dryly, after her first gasp of astonishment. "Billy the Kid, you sure do go some. What's the matter, Mom? Is it Steve again? I saw him riding off as I came up."

"It's Steve — never no more," Cole answered her because Mother Harris could not speak. "I'm adopted and I'm going to call her Mother after this, and you better stop calling me Billy the Kid. Mother wants me treated with all due respect and some little kindness, if possible."

"Oh, is that so!" A weak retort which proved a whirling brain.

"I've forbid Steve — the house," Mother Harris explained between sobs.

"Well, it's about time," Dorothy made brief comment.

"It was the last — straw — the way he — talked to me. Your father would — have — turned in his grave to hear it. And — Cole — has offered to stay and ——"

"I hope you never start in trying to trade horses for a living, Mom," Dorothy observed with seeming irrelevance. "Well, I guess you fixed Steve aplenty. He went off talking to himself, and he wouldn't speak to me when I met him in the trail. Better hide Billy the Kid's six-gun, Mom, and hobble him to the table leg, meal times, so I'll dare stay on the same ranch with him."

Cole astonished himself by laughing aloud, and after a surprised look at him Dorothy laughed also, with a little, impudent grimace to which Cole retaliated with one lower eyelid. So a truce was silently declared over Mom's shoulder that had borne the brunt of their bickerings, and Cole began to think that maybe the world was not so sordid and unfriendly a place, after all.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TRAPPED

LIFE began to assume a normal, kindly aspect for Cole who had believed himself thoroughly embittered against it. He found himself speaking to Dorothy almost as freely as he talked with her mother, and could take her gibes in the spirit she gave them, without resentment, but flinging back a retort in kind; like two pups flying suddenly at each other's throats and making a great pretense of savage battle, or boys who clinch and go down in a tangle of straining arms and legs in a friendly wrestling match. Dorothy still called him Billy the Kid, but Cole no longer minded the sinister title. He dubbed her Cactus Carrie instead, and made it plain Cack for short and to further infuriate her.

Even Mutt approved of the new domicile and foreswore his long nocturnal hunting expeditions, putting meat on his ribs while he lay in the shade of the cottonwoods and cracked bones in his teeth; a lazy life for Mutt, these days; a life of full-fed idleness,

his most arduous task the driving of marauding leghorns out of the tomato patch.

Eagle arrived on the third day after Steve's short visit, and with him came all of Cole's belongings which Dorothy declared were being devoured by rats. So Cole was installed in Steve's room, and Steve's things were packed and put in the storeroom, ready to be delivered on short notice to any messenger Steve might send.

"He won't come after 'em himself," Mother Harris grimly predicted. "I guess I settled him, once and for all." And after that she went away and cried over the sorrow and disappointment he had caused her.

The one thing that did not seem to right itself was Cole's kinked neck, and that defied the homely remedies applied by Mother Harris. The shoulder muscles improved somewhat, however, and Cole could walk to the corral and back without suffering tortures afterward. But as for working, that was out of the question; for the time being, Cole remained what Billy Parrish would have called a star boarder. His offer to help was as yet an empty promise.

That irked him. It left too much time for

thinking, and his thoughts, in spite of the friendly atmosphere which surrounded him, were not always pleasant. For one thing, he felt as if he ought to tell Mrs. Harris the truth about himself. He knew she must wonder why he didn't; he wondered himself, the times he was left alone while she and Dorothy were busy with the chores, doing a man's tasks while he sat idle with his back against a hop-stained pillow.

He ought to tell the whole story; about his mother, the C Bar L, his father's mysteriously unfortunate business entanglements, his sudden crash from apparent wealth to bankruptcy — and then the tragic end of it all. They had believed him, these two, when he said he was no thief; they must have believed him, or they would not be so willing to let him stay and help with the heavy work. After that night of Roper's visit they had avoided the subject, save when Dorothy teased him with the name of outlaw — and thereby proved how little she thought him one — but he knew that the mystery of him must nag at their minds. Mother Harris at least was entitled to know.

At night, when he lay awake and thought

of all that had happened in the last month, and of the goodness of Mrs. Harris — yes, and of Dorothy since the truce — he would promise himself that in the morning he would tell her, perhaps while Dorothy was driving the cows back to pasture. It wouldn't take long. He even composed the sentences he meant to speak. He knew just how long it would take. He would say:

"Mother Harris, I'm going to tell you who I am. The reason I haven't told you before is because I can't stand having it talked about, but there's nothing I've done to put me here among strangers. I blotted the brands on my horses because I didn't want any one to know I'm from the C Bar L. My name is Cole Lawson, and my father ——" Yes, he would tell her the whole truth, but it would not be easy from there on.

It was so hard that for days he procrastinated. He would wait until after breakfast, because he didn't want to have her look at him across the table with the story fresh in her mind and her pity for him shining in her eyes. No, he would wait until she was rubbing his neck. She would be standing behind him then, and he would not see her face at

all. No, she was talking about all the work there was to be done before cold weather; how the cow stable must be banked higher on the north and west sides, and more dirt piled on the roof, because the cows would fall off in their milk if they were not warm enough; how the winter's wood must be hauled down out of the canyon; how the hay must be bought and hauled from Miller's place, because it cost three dollars more a ton if they delivered it; how a dozen things must be done.

Another day it was the same. The hours slipped away while he held the first sentence behind his lips, ready for speech but waiting upon his aversion for the subject. It would not be the same, after he had told. They would know he had been accustomed all his life to better things than they could afford — Dorothy had already flung at him some gibe for the clothes he wore — and they would be conscious of their poverty. They would think about it, maybe speak of it unthinkingly. They accepted him now, and they could do no more if they knew. It would sound as if he were making a bid for their pity, and that was the last thing he wanted.

So he did not tell. Like the subject of Steve, which they left alone by common consent after his room had been emptied of his belongings, Roper's story lay in the background of their minds. They did not accept his statement that Roper was a villain; they had known Roper too long for that. But they did not attempt to argue about it, and Cole found it easier and easier to let things remain as they were, tacitly taboo.

Later he wondered whether he had been wise to keep silence.

It was on the sixth day, with a haze in the air that sent the far hills swimming in elusive lights and shadows, and with a languorous hint of coming autumn in the warm breeze that blew up from the southwest in little vagrant gusts that fanned one pleasantly upon the face and passed on. Cole had walked slowly and deliberately down to the corral to see how Eagle was coming along. The other horses were in the pasture and Mutt was asleep somewhere. Dorothy had ridden over to Miller's with the ten pounds of butter delivered every week, and Mother Harris was churning in the milk house; a task which Cole had attempted to perform and couldn't be-

cause of the jar of the dasher which felt like a hot hammer pounding upon his shoulder.

A couple of horsemen came riding quietly up the trail from Catrock, and when they saw Cole standing beside the corral they separated, one coming up on either side of him. It was Eagle that warned him of their approach, and he turned just in time to see Steve Harris nod and point, and the other man pull a gun.

"That's him," said Steve, pulling up his horse and glowering at Cole.

"What do you want?" Cole, with his head tilted to one side and his neck bandaged, was not a formidable looking foe, and he knew it and lifted his lip in a sneer.

"You. I'm a deputy sheriff, and you're wanted for shootin' with intent to kill; murderous assault on Steve Harris. Don't yuh try any tricks — I know all about yuh and I won't take any chances. Put up your hands — and Steve, you better see if he's packin' a gun."

Even then Cole's predicament did not impinge itself upon his senses. Steve was not hurt; the bullet had no more than scratched deeply the side of his neck, according to

Mother Harris, who had seen the scar. That he would ever have to face more than Steve's personal animosity had never occurred to Cole, for in his experience the law was not called upon unless men's quarrels were more serious than this.

It flashed across his mind that this was not a bona fide officer making a legal arrest, but some crony of Steve's who was playing the part for some sinister purpose of their own; to get him away from the ranch without interference, most likely, for Steve must know that the two women were capable of making him trouble if he roused them sufficiently. Steve would not dare start trouble with Cole at the ranch. He would not want Mother Harris to know about it.

"You can't run any bluff on me," Cole said contemptuously. "If you're an officer and want me, you must have a warrant."

"Sure, I've got a warrant! You can see it when we get that gun you're so damn free with. Take it off him, Steve. If he makes a crooked move, I'll lay him out."

They had all the best of it, for it happened that Cole's gun was at the house. Steve came up and made certain he was unarmed, and the

deputy thereupon produced the warrant and gave it to Cole. He read it with a growing sense of incredulous fury. He had never before seen a warrant of arrest, but there was no mistaking the authenticity of this document. He was named as John Doe, but for the rest it was terribly explicit.

Cole was appalled, stunned by the unexpectedness of it.

He was trapped; there was no choice for him, unless he could fight, and if he even attempted that he would be killed for resisting arrest.

Steve was already carrying his saddle over from the shed, in haste to be gone before the women came to upbraid him.

"Better take him down the trail, Joe," he growled, and glanced uneasily at the house. "I'll bring his horse."

So, because he was at their mercy, Cole walked down the trail ahead of the deputy and his gun. Handcuffs gripped his wrists — they had seen to that without any delay. As Joe had observed, they were taking no chances. Presently Steve rode down to overtake them, leading Eagle by the bridle reins. They waited grimly while Cole mounted, and

they herded him between them as if he were some dangerous criminal.

With his manacled hands clasped over the saddle horn and every hoofbeat marking time to the agony that racked his body, Cole rode away in that sleepy sunlight. He was poignantly aware of Mother Harris in the milk house humming an old-fashioned love song while she sent the dasher up and down, up and down with a muffled plop when it struck the rich cream in the stone churn; of Mutt, lying asleep in the shade near the spring, where the ground was moist and cool and he had scratched a comfortable hollow for himself; of the ducks waddling in and out of the spring creek just above the stable, flirting their wings and gossiping among themselves; of the horses down in the pasture; of Dorothy galloping home from Miller's — but not along this trail — and of the mystery, perhaps the worry of his unaccountable absence. What would they think of him?

And then the sickening answer that struck him like a blow. They would think that he had lied about himself, and that he had taken sudden alarm and gone hurrying away to escape capture for some crime that dogged

his footsteps. They would think that he had not dared take the time to get the other horses, but had saddled Eagle and fled from whatever it was that threatened him.

They would assume then that he had lied about Roper also; that he had wormed himself into their confidence for sake of the security of that lonely little ranch tucked back against the hills. How could they know or suspect the truth? If Steve had watched the place, he could not have selected a better time for taking Cole secretly away. He remembered now that they had held their voices down; Steve must have known Mother Harris was churning, that Dorothy had ridden away from the ranch. He must have waited until he saw Cole walk down to the corral.

They rode swiftly, as if they feared some awkward meeting on the trail. They did not speak, and Cole was thankful for that. He did not want them to guess that he was riding with his teeth clenched, holding back any expression of the agony of that ride. And there was Eagle with his newly healed shoulder—he must be suffering too, thought Cole. Eagle was gamely keeping up with the other horses, but Cole could feel the effort it cost him and

he added that item to the black list against Steve and Roper (who was probably cognizant of this particular exploit) and the town where they were taking him.

So once again Cole felt himself slipping back into the darkness of a smoldering fury against circumstances that seemed malignly intent upon destroying him body and soul. He steeled himself against whatever might lie ahead of him, and set himself the hard task of endurance. It was all that he could do.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"THAT WORD'S GUILTY"

"WELL, young fella, I see you've been getting yourself into a little trouble. No business of mine — my job is to keep you safe and sound till the judge has his say. But maybe I can give you a little advice that will help out. I've had a good many men put in my care, and every one of 'em could tell you I stood ready to help where I could."

This was the sheriff speaking. He reminded Cole a little of big Ed Carroll of the Black Rim; twinkling blue eyes that seemed to miss nothing, a passionless, imperturbable face that masked whatever emotions filled his soul, and a big body capable of putting forth considerable brute strength when occasion demanded. He had brought a weekly paper and a package of cigarettes and apparently these were meant to pave the way to acquaintance with his new prisoner. At least Cole suspected it and refused to meet the friendly overtures.

"You run against a mean proposition when

you tackled Steve Harris," the sheriff went on, after a pause spent in picking his teeth and sizing up Cole through half-closed lids. "He's goin' to put you over the road if he can. What's the matter? Boil on your neck?"

"Sprained it," Cole answered him shortly.

"When? Last night?"

"No. Week or so ago. Wind caught me with a pitchfork of hay in the air."

"Uh-huh. Thought maybe Steve had something to do with it. I'll have a doctor take a look at it. You look bad, and that's a fact. What happened to your wrist?"

"Bullet went through the flesh." There was no use in trying to hide the puckered scar, and Cole slipped back his sleeve for a better view.

"Steve?"

"Steve or one of the others. There were three of them."

"Uh-huh. Steve has got two witnesses in town ready to take the stand and swear you rode up and shot Steve without cause or provocation."

"That's a damned lie," grated Cole. "They were trying to stop me. Pulled up in

the trail, and one of them hollered at me to stop."

" Uh-huh. Them was the Griswold boys, Ben and Tike. Know 'em? "

" I don't know anybody around here. I'm a stranger."

" Where from? "

Silence. Then, "Points west," said Cole shortly, as he had done once before.

" Never was there, but I've heard of the place," said the sheriff, and Cole's quick glance from under his eyebrows could not determine whether the sheriff was joking or in earnest. " What was the rush? " He went on with his quizzing. " That night, I mean."

" I was getting away from Roper."

" John Roper? "

" Yes." This was getting close to something Cole had not meant to tell, but the sheriff had a mild way of waiting for his answers which seemed to pull them forth from Cole's lips almost as if the sheriff dragged them out with a string. It was, too, like starting down a steep incline and not being able to stop. Cole did not know where the terrifically simple questions would lead him. He felt as if the sheriff read the truth before

it was uttered; as if his words merely confirmed what the sheriff already knew. Cole had never, you see, been questioned by one who is accustomed to dragging the truth from criminals, and the method was new to him.

"What had Roper done to you?"

"Nothing. It was what he was trying to do."

"What was that?"

"Well," said Cole with measured calm, "I heard him talking about bumping me off. He said those were four good horses I had."

"Where was that?"

"That was down in what he called the Sinks?"

"What were *you* doing in the Sinks?"

"I was going with Roper and Pete. Roper hired me to help him get back a bunch of horses he said were stole from him. He said it was ticklish work and he might have trouble. He said he couldn't go to law about it, because the sheriff was in cahoots. He would pay me a hundred dollars, he said, and it wouldn't last longer than a month."

"Uh-huh. When did you hear this talk about bumping you?"

"In the Sinks. It was dark and my horse

took up the wrong side of one of those edges of rock that stick up narrow and high like chicken combs all over, every which way."

" Uh-huh. That's the Sinks, all right. You say your horse took the wrong side? "

" They went up one way and my horse took up along the rock on the other side. I missed them and was waiting to see if they would come along, and I heard them talking. There was a wide crack in the rocks there and the sound came through plain. They were going back to look for me. Roper said the farther they got me in the Sinks the better."

" Uh-huh. What did you do? "

" I waited all night and all the next day. The wind was blowing so hard my tracks were covered, and the horses were in a niche out of sight. At dusk I took a chance, and my horse Johnnie led me out."

" That's when you run across Steve and the Griswold boys? "

" Yes. I was up on top of the ledge that day, and Pete and Roper came along past. I guess their side of the rock was the trail home. I heard them again. Roper said Jim would see me with the glasses — that's why I waited till it was too dark for him."

"You thought Steve's bunch was some of Roper's men?"

"Yes. They swung across the road. One of them did. I commenced to shoot and ride straight for them. They got one of my horses in the shoulder and me in the wrist, but I made it away from there all right."

"You think now that you made a mistake, don't you?"

"Yes," said Cole after a minute, "I do. But Roper and Steve are pretty thick, just the same. He sent Roper to Mrs. Harris for money, and Roper lied. He told her Steve was in the hospital and needed an operation. He said Steve was shot through the body."

"Uh-huh. But you don't think Steve was after you that night."

"No-o — I think he was just riding along and I happened to meet him and the rest."

"Uh-huh. That's what I think too, kid. But Steve is sore at you. Know why?" He put the toothpick away in his vest pocket and made a final polishing of his teeth with his tongue. "Beyond that little furrow in his neck, which don't amount to much, what other reason has he got for being down on you?"

"I don't know. Unless it was because he found me there when he went home. He had trouble with Mrs. Harris and she turned him out; told him to beat it. And," Cole added with dangerous frankness, "Roper told him I was an outlaw, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because my horses have all got blotted brands. I don't know any other reason."

"All of them?"

"Yes. I marked out the brands myself. I had a right to. They're my horses."

"What was wrong with their brands?"

"Nothing. I got tired of looking at them, is all."

"Steve says he's goin' to put you in the pen. If not for the shootin', then he'll bring a charge of horse stealin'."

"How? They're my horses, I tell you."

"How, ain't my job, kid." The sheriff got out his pipe and knocked the dottle free against a bar of the door. "No, that ain't my job, but keepin' the country free of criminals is — as far as my power goes.

"Now, take your case here. You ain't got a ghost of a show before a jury. Steve grew up in the country, and he's got friends —

naturally. The Griswold boys are pretty wild, but they're all right, so far as takin' their word in court goes. You admit you rode up out of the Sinks, met them three in the trail and wouldn't stop when they called. Maybe they thought they knew you. They can say they did, and who's goin' to read their minds? Now, say they do testify to that. You start shootin'. You've got four horses with yuh, and they've all got blotched brands. How's that goin' ta look to a jury?

"Now, say you get five years in the pen. Old Judge Bailey don't hardly ever give less 'n that. You *could* get *ten* — all depends on what the charge is and how black they paint yuh. You go up there and herd with criminals. You're — twenty? twenty-one? — just a kid. You ain't old enough to be hard, but you will be when you git out. You'll come out on the fight, if I know your stripe. You'll blame the law and you'll be an enemy of the law from the first jump. In all probability, you'll have it in your head to get the one that put you in jail. I've seen it work out time and again; I've been a peace officer for over fifteen years, and I've yet to see the kid that come back better than when he went in. If

a fella ain't a criminal when he goes, you can gamble almost that he'll be one when he comes out. If he thinks he didn't get a square deal, he's almost sure to come back ready to break the law."

"I haven't broken any laws so far," Cole said sullenly. " A man's got a right to defend his own life and property."

" Uh-huh. Sure he has. I'm talkin' about what will get before a jury, and what the jury 'll say and the judge 'll say. Your case goes to a jury; you ain't got a Chinaman's chance of getting an acquittal."

"I can't help that, can I? "

" Now that's just what I'm comin' to, kid. You can help it in this way, and it's the *only* way. You can plead guilty to this charge of shootin' with intent to do bodily injury. That'll get you a light sentence right here in the county jail, and it'll head off anything in the nature of a frame-up to send you up for five or ten years. See the difference?

" You'll be savin' the county money too. You plead not guilty and stand trial, and the county's got to spend money to prosecute the case. That won't get you anything but a longer sentence in a darn sight worse jail.

It'll get in the papers, and if you've got friends over at Points West, they're liable to hear about it. You better plead guilty, kid, and take the easy job and be done with it." He puffed at his pipe, got up and walked to the barred door which he had locked behind him, and looked out as if he were expecting some one. But perhaps he was only giving Cole time to think. For in a minute or two he turned and came back to the iron cot where Cole sat staring gloomily at the stone floor.

"Does Roper know you heard him talkin' about you, that time in the Sinks?"

"No. If he'd known I was anywhere around there I wouldn't have lasted long."

"The boys don't know why you started shootin' at 'em, then?"

"No-o, I guess not. I don't see how they could, except that they tried to stop me."

"That'd look as if you was on the dodge and takin' no chance with strangers. Who all have you told? About Roper, I mean."

"I told Mrs. Harris and her daughter. They didn't believe it."

"Think they'll repeat it to anybody?"

Cole did not know, but he was inclined to

the belief that they would not discuss him any more than was necessary. They would be afraid of doing him a harm.

"I guess they don't gossip," he said. "They think Roper is all right."

"Uh-huh. Well, they ain't alone in that, so you'd best not tell anybody else what you told me. Don't tell *nobody*. Keep all that behind your teeth, no matter what happens, till I give you the word to talk. I won't, while this Steve case is up for settlement. You could only hurt yourself, and do nobody else any harm. You get that? Leave Roper out of it. *Don't talk.*

"Now, when you go before Judge May for your preliminary hearing, plead guilty. I'll do what I can for yuh, kid — get you off with a light sentence. You didn't do much damage to Steve, so you won't get much. Just plead guilty and keep your face closed about everything. Will you do that?"

"Yes," said Cole, after a minute of rapid thought. "I don't know why you've gone to all this trouble about it, but I can see where you may be right, at that."

"I am right," said the sheriff softly. "I'm righter than you know. I ain't been sheriff

for fifteen years without havin' my wisdom teeth cut. You don't know all the ins and outs of this case, you see. All you've got is your own personal angle of it.

"Now, look upon me as your friend, kid, but don't act like I am. When you go to court, I mean. One word is all I want you to say, and that word's *guilty*. Get that?"

"Yes-s—" But Cole hesitated, turning his body slantwise so that he could look up at the other towering above him. "Roper didn't give you a very good recommend, so I guess you're all right. Anyway, I'm up against it. Yes, I never denied shooting Steve, so I'll plead guilty."

"What I don't want," said the sheriff, leaning over him to whisper it, "is for you to start explainin' *why* you done it. They can't go back of that plea, to drag anything out of you——"

"You sure have," Cole suddenly charged him. "I wasn't going to talk to you, either — but I did."

The sheriff chuckled so that his sides shook, but a man outside the barred door would not have heard him laughing.

"Sure, you talked. But don't yuh talk to

anybody else that way. Now, I'm going to bring a doctor over to look at that neck. You won't have your hearing before this afternoon."

He went away, and Cole somehow felt comforted in spite of the stone walls and iron bars that shut him in.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NINETY DAYS AND DESPAIR

"WELL, you got off pretty lucky, after all. Ninety days beats five years considerable." Sheriff Saunders unlocked the jail door and signed Cole to enter first.

Cole stopped in the doorway and cast one long glance behind him at the wooded hills which rose beyond the town of Crater. The sun was shining warmly down into the narrow valley, the breeze carried the faint odor of hemlock and spruce and pine. Somewhere back in a narrow lane that led to the hills a burro set up a raucous braying that reminded him of the Wop's lugubrious plaint. Ninety days, and the snow would be falling into those purple canyons up there; ninety days — and the Harris stable not banked to the eaves, the wood not hauled down for the winter, nothing done save what two pairs of woman hands could perform; ninety days of cooped inaction like a coyote in a cage; ninety eternities! Cole stepped over the doorsill and started down the short, narrow corridor, past

the place where heavy leg irons, with chains running up to an iron belt, hung on the wall beside other appurtenances that smacked of old horrors but were manifestly intended for use in quelling recalcitrant prisoners. Ninety days of it — for Cole Lawson, a month ago the young autocrat of the C Bar L!

"Not that way, kid. You go in here, right next the office, where I can keep an eye on you."

Cole turned obediently, dully indifferent to his quarters, and walked into a cell such as he had read about but had never before seen; not so bad a place unless one were locked into it, he thought, as he gave an apathetic glance at the meager furnishings. Saunders locked the door and stood looking speculatively in at him through the bars, studying Cole's face with a curious intentness for a man who has seen prisoners of all sorts and sizes and condition come and go for fifteen years and longer.

"Cheer up, Cole. Somebody's comin' you'll maybe be glad to see. Be here to-night, maybe. How's your neck?"

"All right — better, anyway." Cole walked over and sat down heavily on the cot, his face going into his two palms in the

posture of complete dejection. "I don't want to see anybody," he added without looking up. "All I want is to be left alone."

"You'll get over that," was the sheriff's philosophical remark as he walked away.

Cole lay down on the bed and tried not to think. Thoughts came trooping up, whirling from this subject to that subject with a maddening irrelevance that somehow fitted into a sequence of such utter wretchedness that his very body seemed to feel the weight of despair.

Who was coming? — Not Mother Harris — Dorothy wouldn't come — couldn't leave the ranch long enough — He wouldn't see them if they did come. Behind the bars — that was the ultimate disgrace — Mother always spoke those words solemnly. Steve and the Griswold boys had looked cheated. Roper — what was Roper doing there? — Pete too — ready to testify against him. Who was coming to-night? — Nobody he knew. He wouldn't see any one. They'd peek in through the bars. Why did the sheriff want to keep an eye on him? — Gene had gone to jail once — some fight or other. Ninety days — thank God the folks he knew wouldn't

hear about it. And this was the way he was making his own way in the world! Fine start — ninety days in jail. What made the sheriff talk like that? Want to keep him out of the pen. Maybe he was a friend of Steve — no, he'd have — Who was coming? What did they want? What would become of his horses? He didn't want Mother Harris to feed them. How was Eagle? Maybe the sheriff would look after him. What would happen, now he was in jail? Would those blotched brands make his horses — would some one just take them and claim them? Roper wanted them. Who was coming? Nobody he wanted to see — maybe Billy Parrish. Yes, he'd like to tell Billy about it — Billy would know what to do. What a damned mess he'd made of things! Couldn't be Billy — nobody knew where he had gone. Just dropped out of the Black Rim. No way of tracing him — nobody would take the trouble, anyway. Who was coming to see him?

Hour after hour, that question nagged at him, slipped into the front of his mind and pushed back other thoughts. Maybe it was Roper. But no, the sheriff had said it was

some one he'd be glad to see. Cole could not think of any one on earth he wanted to see in that cell. He wanted to drop out of sight and out of memory until the ninety days were up, and then — well, then he did not know what he would do. He could not seem to look past the next three months. They stood before him a black wall that shut out the future, almost as final as the thing that had come to his father that day in the office room at the C Bar L; only, he could go on thinking, and his father's tired brain slept — he hoped.

After a while some one began to sing a ribald ballad off key. Cole had not known there were other prisoners in the jail, and this evidence of companionship struck him unpleasantly. He would rather be alone. He dreaded even the return of the sheriff. Where was Joe, the surly deputy who had brought him here?

Gloom deepened to black dark, and then a light snapped on in the corridor. It painted a checkered shadow on the floor of his cell, and Cole absently counted the squares. A blot slid across them, stopped and he heard the bar of his door lift and clang. It was his supper, but he did not want it. He wanted

to be left alone. His jailer — not the sheriff, but a stranger — set a tray on the floor and slammed the door shut. The bar dropped, and presently he walked past whistling, with another tray held in one hand.

"Here y' are, ole socks!" Cole heard him call good-naturedly to some one beyond. "And here's the magazine I was tellin' you about. Couldn't get hold of the one that had the first part of that story, but it's all explained so you can get the hang of it. How you fixed for the makin's? Huh? New feller? Oh, he got ninety days or a fine, and he wouldn't pay the fine — couldn't, maybe — so he's layin' it out. Steve was sore as hell; he wanted to send him up for a stretch. Kid beat him to it. Saunders put him in One, I guess, because he ain't right sure how he'll act. — I know, but he looks like a mean umbry. Wait till we size him up, and then maybe you can bunk in together."

Back he came, whistling; looked in and saw Cole's tray untouched and stood irresolute.

"Hey, your grub's gettin' cold," he cried buoyantly. "What the hell do you think I bring it hot for? Better throw it into yuh

— I've got to take the dishes back in a few minutes."

Cole did not answer, and the fellow went on, resuming the whistled tune where he had left off.

Silence. The checkered shadow on the floor. A dull throbbing at the base of his neck, where the doctor's fingers had probed mercilessly and with a final twinge of pain that had somehow relieved the stiffness. Who was coming? Maybe the sheriff just said that to give him hope. Maybe the sheriff was not so friendly as he had seemed. It might be Steve who was coming; or no one at all.

Ages of that, with his thoughts ranging round and round the circumscribed bounds of his misfortunes. What had he done, that this thing should come upon him? No great wrong, surely. Nothing for which he should be punished like a malefactor.

With his eyes mechanically tracing the squares of light on the floor, he retraced step by step his actions of the past month. He had started out to make his life over, among strangers; nothing in that to bring disaster upon him. That was one square. He had asked for work and been twitted about his dad

— square two, and nothing there for which he could blame himself. So he went on to the blotting of the brands, to Roper and the ride into the Sinks, the long hours there and the ride out again. Any man would have done as he did, it seemed to him. And yet something must be wrong somewhere. Deep within his soul he sensed the inexorable law of cause and effect. The great law of compensation. It was there, it must be there — the cause. Somehow he had set in motion the law, and it had brought him here to this cell in the county jail of Crater.

Round and round went his thoughts, seeking the answer to the puzzle. And then, quite suddenly, it came; or if it did not, at least the thought that struck him was illuminating and he sat dismayed before it.

He had tried to dodge, to shirk consequences, back there at the C Bar L. He had not wanted to face his friends and live down the look in their eyes, hear the note of sympathy in their voices. He had run away from that. What if he had stayed, had gone on to town with Carroll, had taken his place with Billy Parrish and the rest of the boys, and made the best of things? He had thought he

was doing the proud, independent, brave thing when he rode away from it all, but now he saw that he had done the weak, cowardly thing instead. And when he marked out the brands, that too had been an attempt to dodge the issue.

Until that evening Cole Lawson had been able to think well of himself, however he might criticize and condemn those around him. He had been able always to justify his actions to himself; it was the other fellow who had blundered. But now he faced his own weakness and knew it for just that; his vanity — he could no longer call it pride. It made a difference. Cole Lawson began to appear rather contemptible in his eyes; not the fine, high-spirited young man who asked no man for sympathy or pity or help, but a swell-headed youth who wasn't willing to stand up and take a few hard blows. Yes, it surely did make a difference.

So, having dodged and run away from what Life had placed before him, he was here because this was the trail he had taken. You couldn't run away from things and find any good fortune along the path of your flight. You had to take what came your way, and

make the best you could of it. You couldn't dodge — Life wouldn't let you; if you refused your lesson in one form, you got it in another.

It was his mother's teaching, unheeded until now when it all came back to shed a little light in the darkness. Cole raised his head and looked around him, at the bare walls, the door that let in the light in squares. His supper sat cold on its tray, just where the cheerful attendant had placed it; not much of a supper, but food of a sort. He went over and lifted the tray, sat down with it upon his knees. The big mug of coffee was cold, the beef stew was cold; but that was his own fault. They had been hot enough when the man brought them, and he had let them cool while he sulked.

Cole drank the cold coffee, but the stew was too much for him, so he ate the bread that came with it and put the tray back by the door. He stood up and peered out into the corridor, his mind curiously at ease now that he had reached what seemed to him a solution of the puzzle his life had become. If all this was the result of dodging issues, then hereafter he would meet whatever came his

way. He would do the best he could with it and let it go. Even these ninety days he would meet somehow without that sullen resentment which he now saw had dominated him during the past month.

Though he did not know it, youth dropped away from Cole on that evening and left the man; a little hard around the mouth, a little somber in the eyes, but a man who would give the trail to none, come good luck or bad; a man who would drive straight to his purpose, who was done with subterfuges and evasions.

Restless after the long, silent hours of tense thought and no muscular action, he made a smoke and began pacing slowly back and forth the short length of his cell. He was waiting now with a more normal curiosity for the arrival of the sheriff and his mysterious visitor. He still had no idea who it could be, but now it did not seem to matter much. He had neither defiance nor dread, but only an expectant mood of waiting to try his newfound strength of soul and purpose, to turn his face toward his world and put his philosophy to the test.

He had finished that cigarette and was

starting another, turning toward the barred light in the corridor so that he could see to sift the tobacco into the little paper trough in his fingers. A shadow fell upon the floor, blotting out the black squares; the shadow of a man wearing the high-crowned range hat which was the fashion among those he knew. Though he had not heard any one approach — they went cat-footed on rubber heels in that jail, it seemed — he knew that it must be the visitor, for the silhouette did not resemble the sheriff, somehow.

Cole stared at it for a minute, raised his head and looked up into the twinkling blue eyes of big Ed Carroll, the sheriff whom he had last seen riding away from the C Bar L horse corral.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

COLE RECEIVES A SHOCK

"YEAH, he's the sheriff of Points West," chuckled Saunders, when the three were settled in the jail office with the door closed. There had been a decided air of secrecy about the trip from cell to office, and among other puzzling things Cole wondered why; but since it did not seem to be his party, he waited until he was spoken to. "I kinda thought you'd recognize him. Glad to see him?"

"Well, I'm not sorry, that I know of. How are you, Mr. Carroll? You didn't come clear over to Crater on my account, I hope — and how 'd you know I was here?"

"Didn't, till Saunders wired me. Lookin' kinda peaked, ain't yuh, Cole? Told you the devil was a poor boss to work for, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. But you never came away over here to crow about that. What have I done in your county that I shouldn't?" Two hours ago Cole could not have talked in that vein to save his life, but now he seemed to have dropped a weight of some kind, and the

sight of Carroll stimulated him, cheered him even. All the boys had liked Sheriff Carroll. Even in these circumstances he was a friend from home and it was amazing how Cole warmed to his presence.

"Nothing, except leave it. Bill Saunders here has been telling me you got yourself in a little trouble, Cole. How about that story you told him about John Roper? I'd like to hear the particulars."

Cole looked at Saunders, who was leaning back awkwardly in his desk chair, picking his teeth and staring at Cole with a ruminative expression that hid whatever might have been passing through his mind. Stupid, Cole thought him; stupid, but good-natured and probably honest.

"Why, I guess Mr. Saunders told you all there is to tell," he answered, after a minute. "I rode with Roper to take a job helping him get some horses, and I overheard him mourning because he hadn't killed me while he had the chance. He wanted my four horses. I gave him the slip all right, but it was while I was doing it that I bumped into the trouble that landed me here in jail. You know my Eagle horse? Well, he got shot pretty bad in

the shoulder. He's the one they made me ride in, and now you're here, Mr. Carroll, I wish you'd see if he's all right."

"I'm lookin' after the horse," Saunders grunted. "Got him in the stable with my own."

"What made you blot the brands, Cole?" Carroll was studying him more intently than even Cole's predicament seemed to warrant.

"Well, I wanted to cut loose from everything, and the brand advertised where I was from. I did it after I'd stopped at a ranch up under the Pass and asked for work. Fellow there knew who I was, just by the brand on the horses. He threw it at me — and I turned and rode off, and after that I marked out the brands. I didn't want everybody asking about — things that was none of their business." He shot a sidelong glance at Saunders, wondering if he knew.

Saunders let his chair tilt forward and snapped the toothpick between his fingers.

"That the Muleshoe, where you stopped?"

"I don't know — yes, I guess it was. I saw some cattle ranging near there with a muleshoe brand; or anyway, it could be called that."

"And you blotted the brands *after* that, and — when was it you met Roper?"

"Four or five days afterward. Five. I camped four days by a creek, in a little meadow, and then I rode in to a place — Little Lost was the sign over the gate — and bought some grub. It was that night at supper when Roper and a fellow he called Pete rode into camp. They asked themselves to supper, and they kept eyeing the horses, I noticed; but I didn't think anything much of it at the time — folks always do look them over; they're horses that would take any man's eye."

Saunders looked at Carroll, who pursed his lips in thought.

"There's the connection I been lookin' for," said Saunders softly. "I knew there was one somewhere. What do yuh think, Ed?"

"Looks that way," Carroll admitted. "Four days — that would give 'em plenty of time to send word around."

"Send what word around where?" Cole's eyes widened. "They didn't think I stole the horses. The man at the Muleshoe knew I was Cole Lawson, and he knew the brand was

the Lawson brand. He asked me straight out if I wasn't Cole Lawson's son."

"Uh-huh. And what did you tell him?"

"Me? I told him to go to hell, or words to that effect."

"Thought it was funny Roper would try to pull off a murder just to get the horses," Saunders mused, groping in his pocket for another toothpick. "Well, I guess we got the connection, all right. Hunh! Little thing like that — but it's the little things that leads to big ones. Ain't that right, Ed?"

Carroll was still staring at Cole with a look as if Cole were transparent and he could see through him and beyond to something not visible to the others.

"Funny the kid should be the one — and yet maybe things don't just happen, either. Well, Bill, looks like we got something to go on now. I suppose this bunch here is kinda on the anxious seat about Cole."

"Wisht you coulda been at the p'rliminary, Ed. You'd have seen some sour looks thrown at the kid. Muleshoe, huh? Muleshoe and Roper. Pretty slick. Too slick to foller him themselves, or make a play at the ranch. Uh-huh." Again he ruminated. "That horse

you was riding that night, Cole — he's got an extra feed of oats comin' to him!"

They were talking in riddles, treating Cole like a child who has innocently given grown-ups some valuable information but is not considered old enough to be told what the excitement is all about. Had they told Cole to "Run along and play now," they would have been acting consistently. He resented that.

"I wish you'd quit treating me like a ten-year-old kid," he said sharply. "I've got three months on my hands, with nothing to do but think. I'm not going to put in the time wondering what the devil you two are talking about, and I'm not going to have any chance to tell all I know. You may as well give me the straight of this thing. Why would the Muleshoe men send word on to Roper, and why ——"

"I can tell you that," Saunders cut in, breaking the second toothpick and leaning forward in his chair. "Bart Nelson had his own reasons for getting scarey when he seen you ride up, coming straight from the C Bar L right after your father was killed. I've been kinda puzzled over Bart and his outfit, and never could pin a thing on to 'em. Now,

I can see the connection. You came straight over there and asked for work. I can see now that Bart would think you suspicioned something, and thought maybe you could snoop around and find out a few things. Course, he didn't have no work for yuh!" Saunders looked at Ed Carroll, who nodded his confirmation of the deduction.

"He was scared to tackle you, though; probably he thought you had somebody with you, and was just sent ahead to scout around. No, he wouldn't dare do a thing but let yuh go; and send word around to look out for yuh, and get yuh if possible." He chuckled, that silent shaking of his big body in throes of mirth that made no sound. "I bet the Muleshoe stepped soft, for a while," he added. "Huh, Ed? Lookin' for more C Bar L men to come trailin' the kid."

"Billy Parrish and Red Billings come pretty near doing it," Carroll volunteered. "I got to 'em in time and talked 'em out of it. Made 'em see that it would do the kid good to get away by himself for a while. Pretty much of a shock, the way — things happened. Looked like his dad had committed suicide, and all the property ——"

"*Looked* like it!" Stark white, Cole was on his feet, glaring at the sheriff of Black Rim County. "Didn't he? Was he — was ——"

"Now, Cole, take it easy. I been studying you, and I made up my mind you could stand the gaff now. But if you're going to — hell, man, *sit down!*"

Cole sat down, drawing a long breath as he pulled himself together.

"All right. I'm not a kid any longer, Ed. Shoot the works. I can stand it — anything but being left in the dark, guessing at things."

"Well, guessing's about as good as any of us can do for a while, Cole," Carroll said moodily. "Saunders and I, we're just puttin' two and two together. We couldn't take any of this into court, mind you. We're just piecing the evidence together, and it's you that has furnished us some mighty important pieces." He looked at Saunders inquiringly. "I guess we might as well tell Cole all we know about it, hadn't we? Seems to me he's about as interested a party as any of us."

"Uh-huh, if you say so. You've known him longer than I have. It's a ticklish proposition right now, but — for ninety days he

ain't going to make any foolish moves, and by that time ——"

"I'll stand good for Cole's brains, and it seems to me he ought to know what we know. It's like this, Cole: When I said it *looked* like your father shot himself, that's about as far as I can go, right now. I will say this much, though, that I ain't at all certain it was suicide. Looked that way, because the bank had foreclosed on him all of a sudden, when the bottom dropped out of the beef market, and cattle went down to where it didn't pay to ship. Caught your dad where the hair was short — everybody knows that — but didn't it strike you as mighty funny, Cole, that he should take the six-gun route before he'd even found out how bad he was going to be off when the banks got through? Course, a man does go crazy enough to do a thing like that, sometimes; but there's a few points I'd like to clear up before I'd say he fired the shot himself."

"The men on the ranch were all in the bunk house," Cole said slowly, his black eyebrows pulled together, while he recalled that scene which he had been trying for a month to forget. "We'd had a big argument at supper

over a certain saddle in a catalogue, and we all went to the bunk house to settle it. It was just about dusk — a little late for shooting hawks — I guess that's why I ran up to the house when I heard ——" He stopped a moment to moisten his lips. "The boys were all in the bunk house," he repeated dully, and stared unseeingly at the floor.

"Yeah, I know. You sure you heard just *one* shot? You sure it wasn't two shots right close together?"

Cole looked up at him, startled out of his gruesome meditation.

"Why — I thought it was one. All the boys were laughing and guying Gene about what he'd said, and there was a good deal of noise, but I thought it was one shot. Afterwards, I thought it was funny I should run to see — Dad was always taking a shot at hawks that came down off the hill after the chickens."

"Maybe," said Carroll dryly, "but you knew it was kinda late in the day for hawks. The chickens had all gone to roost, hadn't they?"

"I guess they had. I never thought about

that — afterwards. But I wasn't more than a minute or two getting to the house."

"No, I don't expect you was. And it wouldn't take more 'n a minute for a man to get into the brush back of the house. How long would it take you to duck out of that room and into the gully behind the house?"

"About ten seconds," Cole made quick calculation.

"Yeah, about that. Would anybody at the bunk house or the corrals be liable to see yuh?"

"No, they wouldn't. Not unless they were watching the door. From the bunk house you can't see the door, anyway. Dad used that room for an office, because the windows were just right for his desk, and the room has got that outside door. But he couldn't see what was going on around the corrals, unless he came to the door and looked out." He stopped abruptly, swallowing the lump that rose in his throat. How often had his dad appeared in the doorway, looking to see what mischief he was up to!

"Well, it's mostly guesswork. But there's the tracks of high-heel boots going down into that gully, and whoever made 'em was run-

ning. They don't show at the house, because the gravel walk is wide there and beyond the gravel is a strip of grass. But beyond the grass, dipping down into the gully, is where the tracks show plain. Anybody you know of been running down there, right around close to that day?" Carroll was making it as easy as he could for Cole. "Did you, for instance?"

"No. There wasn't any reason for any one to go down there. Dad left that hill wild, and the gully too, because — because Mother liked it just as nature made it. That's why our yard wasn't fussed up much with flower beds. She loved the wild growth. Her room looked down into that gully and up the hill beyond. We all liked that view. Dad wouldn't even put a fence where it would show on that hill."

"So if any fresh tracks showed, runnin' into that gully, it's safe to say nobody on the ranch made 'em; that what you mean?"

Cole took time to study the matter. He could see now what Carroll was driving at, and he knew he must not make a mistake.

"No matter how many are living around a place," he said, after a minute's thought,

"there are always certain spots they don't bother. That gully's one of them. There just wasn't any reason to go down there, is all. I don't suppose any one went into it once in six months; not since I grew up, anyway. I used to play Injun down in there, and hide from Mother or Dad when they got after me for something. But that's all it's good for. Even the chickens range off the other way, toward the creek."

"That's what Billy Parrish told me. I ain't talked with the rest of the boys about it. But there's tracks in there, just the same. Whoever come and went that way, done it more than once. They could go up the gully to the top of the hill, crawl through the fence and ride off across the pasture without any one seeing them. That right?"

"It could be done, yes. It could be, but it wasn't; not by any one at the C Bar L. It would be too much out of the way, getting anywhere."

"Not for some," Carroll remarked, with grim meaning. "Well, I got to prowling around and run across them tracks, and that's what started me thinkin'. Since then there's been other things to bear out the theory that

somebody was there that evening to see your dad. He was used to staying in that office a lot, wasn't he?"

"Since Mother died, he was. He liked to be left alone a good deal. When he was in the house he always stayed in his office, except mealtimes and when he went to bed."

"You didn't stay with him — set in there with him?"

"No." Cole caught his breath, suddenly struck with the utter loneliness of his father. "I never thought he wanted me there. He never talked; he read a lot, I guess, and worked over his books and smoked. I was always with the boys in the bunk house or riding around. The house was lonesome — after Mother died. I slept there, is all. Sometimes I ate with Dad, and sometimes with the boys. I guess —" he glanced up at Carroll and away again — "I wasn't much company for Dad. I — wish I had been."

"No fault of yours, Cole. He wanted it that way or he wouldn't have had it that way. When a man puts money-makin' before everything else, he ain't much company for a kid. What's the matter?" He broke off to lean and stare at Cole, who had turned white again.

Cole bit his lip, looked away, caught Saunders staring at him and closed his eyes tightly for a minute. When he opened them again they were not the eyes of a boy. They gleamed with a new bitterness and they met Carroll's look without flinching.

"The way it happened," he said with forced calm. "Could a man — shoot another one — that way?"

Carroll exhaled a long breath and sat back in his chair.

"Would a man lay down on the floor and blow his own brains out with a gun?" he countered slowly. "Both are possible, but neither one is common. I believe the killer knocked your dad down and then shot him — with the gun in his mouth. I found where the bullet went into the wall, *under a chair.* Nobody knows that but me and Billy Parrish. Your dad wasn't in the habit of packing a gun ——"

"No, but he kept it handy. On the table in the office, mostly."

"It ain't a pleasant subject to talk about, Cole, but there's one other point. You got to him first. Remember where the gun laid when you went in?"

"It was right by his hand. His fingers almost touched it; like this." Cole went down on one knee and spread his right hand open on the floor to show them. "The gun lay right there, as if — why, good Lord, Carroll! I never thought at the time, but it ought to have been by the other one! Dad was left-handed in his shooting!" He got up and stood looking a bit wildly from one to the other.

"Now I know Ham Fat was right. He said he heard somebody talking to Dad — remember? We all thought Dad was maybe talking to himself. He did, sometimes, when he was alone and upset over something. Ham Fat said he heard talking, and he heard a bump, but we didn't pay any attention to him. We couldn't see how any one could be with Dad when we were all in the bunk house. Now it fits."

"Who's Ham Fat?" Saunders wanted to know.

"Chinaman cook. He took care of the house. He went and hid when he found out what had happened. That wasn't his name — it was Wong Fat, or something, but we called him Ham Fat just for a josh. Good old chink, too."

"It wasn't him," said Carroll, answering Saunders' look. "Well, you see how it lays, kid. It looked like suicide, all right, and coming right when it did, on top of all them foreclosures, it seemed reasonable enough. And as you say, the way it happened would show it was suicide. But afterwards Billy Parrish asked me on the quiet what I thought of that right-handed shooting for a man that's always shot left-handed, and that started me to prowling around. That's how I happened to run on to the tracks going into the gully. Somebody had left a horse tied to the outside of the fence, up over the hill; more'n once, by the looks of things. It's bushy up there, if you remember, Cole."

"I know."

"It was right in that young pine thicket up there. Ain't more 'n half a mile from the house, but I don't suppose anybody'd go there once a year, unless it was to look after the fence. Gully runs from there on down to the foot of the hill, and brush all the way. What more 'd a man want?"

No one spoke for a minute, and then Cole swore a sudden oath under his breath.

"And for three months I've got to sit in

here doing nothing!" he said bitterly. "Mr. Saunders, you argued me into it, and now if I break jail you needn't blame anybody but yourself. I'll tear the damn joint down, but what I'll get out!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

COLE PLANS HIS CAMPAIGN

COLE got up restlessly and began pacing back and forth across the office, his hands in his pockets, and his sunken eyes bent in haggard misery upon the floor. Murder, not suicide, had taken his life and smashed it with wanton brutality. About the property he did not care so much, perhaps because he had never known the pinch of poverty and so could not visualize all its sordid details. But to think that his father had been murdered and made to seem a coward in death! With all the men on the ranch, men who loved him enough to fight for him, his father had suffered that ignominy, and the murderer had been able to sneak away unsuspected. Without in the least knowing what he did, Cole pulled one fist from his trousers' pocket and shook it at the wall.

"I'll get the ——!" he said between his teeth. "Who was it?" He whirled upon big Ed Carroll, who watched him. "Do you know? Was it Roper? Was it some one at

the Muleshoe? What did they have against Dad? Mr. Saunders, I can't stay in here for three months; I *won't* stay. You've got to let me out so I can ——"

"Now, now, hold on a minute!" Carroll restrained him with an uplifted hand. "You can maybe do more good right where you are now, Cole. This is something we've been workin' on for close to two years. It's more than just your father. That's only one angle of it — no, don't take me wrong, kid; I ain't belittling what happened to him. But the thing goes farther. Saunders and I have been tryin' to get a line on an organized gang of rustlers and hold-up men that's been operatin' all up through this country, and even into Montana and Washington and Oregon. Seemed like one link of the chain was over this way, but Saunders couldn't pin anything to any one.

"Now, I've got reasons to believe your dad knew something. He did a lot of outside buying, you know; little bunch of stock for sale, he'd go grab it. Worked on money he borrowed from the bank, last few years, and branched out more 'n was safe. But anyway, he must have ——"

"If you say he was working with a gang like that, Ed Carroll, I'll kill you!"

"Aw, sit down! I never said he was, nor never meant it. I do say he must have found out something. Maybe he was the goat, on some deal they put over on him. I don't know — but it looks now as if there was something brewing at the C Bar L, something the gang was worried about.

"Anyway, Saunders, working over at this end, gets word from me to look out for you, Cole, because you've hit out for yourself and are headed this way. Nothin' to that, only I wanted you should have somebody over here in case you needed a friend. Ain't long till he hears about you shootin' a fellow on the run. At least, he thinks it's you, from what he heard."

"Griswold boys described you," Saunders explained, "and then Pete Brown, that's working for Roper said he'd seen you before that, and that you had some stolen horses and was a hard-lookin' guy that acted like you was on the dodge."

"Yeah, well, when this fellow swore out a complaint ——"

"Steve Harris," Saunders supplied.

" — Bill saw there was a lot more feeling displayed than the crime called for, so he wired me to come over. Then he got your story, and the thing looked a darn sight bigger than at the start."

Back and forth, back and forth went Cole, like a tiger in a cage. Now he stopped and eyed the two with sharp questioning. They looked quickly at each other, looked away again. Probably they had seen men driven to desperation before and knew the signs. Carroll got up quietly and dropped a hand on Cole's shoulder; the sprained one, for the lad winced.

" Easy, boy. We're counting on your help, but right now you can do more good by staying here in jail, where they think you're safe and they're safe. If it's like we think it is, somebody over on this side the mountains knows more about what happened that night in your house than you do. But it wasn't Bart Nelson, or he wouldn't have throwed it up to you about your dad. Maybe it was Roper and maybe it wasn't. We don't know. You can't go hellin' up and down Burroback, askin' every man you meet if he killed your dad; you've got to go at it sly and easy — and

maybe slow, to what you 'd like to do. You throwed a scare into the bunch when you come riding down Thunder Pass like you meant to stay, and I'd stake a good deal on my guess that Bart Nelson sent out the word that you're in the country and to look out. Probably Roper was hunting you, and them blotched brands gave him another jolt. It showed you didn't want it known where you was from. All he could think of was to get you off down in the Sinks and see to it you disappeared — and the chances are your horses would have gone with you!

"But what can we *prove?* You say you heard them talking. The two of them can say you lied. Roper's an honest rancher on the face of it, and Pete Brown's his hired man — on the face of it. Now, if they don't know you heard 'em ——"

"They don't. How could they? Unless Mrs. Harris or Dorothy tells." Cole had quieted, but it was the quiet of a leashed bloodhound quivering for the hunt.

"They won't tell," said Saunders.

"So the gang thinks you're out of the way, in jail here, and they're safe. They'd have liked it better if you'd gone to the pen, but

anyway, you're safe for ninety days. Don't you see it, Cole? While they're thinking about you here, we'll be following the lead you've furnished us."

Cole gave an impatient snort and sat down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Carroll had never seen his jaw so square and stubborn, his eyes so hard. He looked years older, more like his father.

"You two are old hands at this, and I'm green," he said tensely, "but there's something you've overlooked. Look here, Carroll, would I be apt to come off over here on a clue of some kind, and nobody else at the ranch know a thing about it? If you're right about the Muleshoe and Roper and all, you can bet your sweet life they're watching for the next move. If that trick to make Dad look like a suicide didn't get by with me, how would it get by with anybody else? I don't know about the Muleshoe outfit, but Roper's no fool. I can see why he'd want to get me out of the way; they'd found out by that time that I was alone, I suppose. But don't you ever think they feel safe and are going to tip their hands!

"The one thing we've got the edge on them

about is the fact that they don't know I was wise to them that night. They never knew I heard them talking about me, so Roper probably thinks I just got lost and wandered around till I found the way out. He thinks he's jake with me, and if I was to meet him in the road he'd probably offer to hire me again. He thinks I was stampeded by them three I met, but he doesn't know I thought they were his men. How could he? The last he saw or heard of me, I was trailing along, expecting to go to work for him!"

"That's right," Saunders admitted.

"I'll bet they're watching over Black Rim way, a heap closer than you're watching over this way. They just thought they'd put me away while they had the chance, but don't ever think they believe the danger stopped with me. For one thing, they never tried to find me. They just let me go. I don't believe they thought I was so darn important, after all. Roper told Mrs. Harris I was an outlaw, on the dodge with stolen horses. I don't see why ——"

"Uh-huh, sure he'd tell some such story," Saunders cut in. "John Roper's an honest rancher, you want to remember. He wouldn't

make any open move against you. That night in the Sinks, it just looked too good a chance to pass up, I guess."

"What you got on your mind, Cole?" Carroll had been watching him.

"Nothing, except that to find out anything worth while, you've got to get right in and work with him and for him. I know every word Bart Nelson at the Muleshoe said, and every word I said, and what's to prove I didn't ride off mad because I'd stolen those four horses of mine? He don't *know* I'm Cole Lawson. You spread around the report that Cole Lawson is somewhere else, Carroll, and I'll go to Roper and bone him for that job he offered me. I'll be an outlaw on the dodge, far as they're concerned."

"You couldn't make it stick," Carroll objected. "Besides, it's too risky."

"I could get away with it all right, if you'll help plant me somewhere else. Say, I'll write a letter to Billy Parrish, and tell him how somebody stole my horses, and how I had to walk to the railroad, and caught a train somewhere. Seattle's a good place. I'll say I'm headed for Alaska. The boys all know I've been crazy to go there, and they'll fall for it.

You can work it, can't you?" Cole looked from one to the other, an eager light in his eyes. "If I was a sheriff I could work it," he hinted. "I'd work it if I had to make the trip to Seattle myself to mail the letter. Anybody you think is in touch with these fellows over here, make darn sure he sees the letter or hears about it, anyway. Get the boys to talk a lot about me going to Alaska.

"Then, when I come out of here, I'll go strike Roper for a job — *and hold it!* Hell, I can be as tough as they are — if it will help find the fellow that ——" He did not finish that sentence. There was no need.

Saunders was industriously wearing another toothpick ragged and watching Cole stupidly. Now he snapped the tiny stick in two and cast the pieces from him, leaning forward with his hands clasped across his middle and his thumbs rolling swiftly over each other; a sign, by the way, that big Bill Saunders was very much awake to the situation.

"I can get you all the dope on ships sailing north," he said, in his lazy drawl. "You'll want plenty of local color that can be checked. Not havin' much money with you, probably you aim to work your passage.

I'll find that out too. I'll have a Cole Lawson stopping at a cheap rooming house down on Second Avenue — I know the place — and I'll have Cole Lawson start for Alaska on any ship we want. Got a friend there — deputy sheriff — he'll fix it up. Mail all the letters you want to write. Better say good-by to all your friends — got a girl over at Points West — you better send her some little beaded dew-dad they sell to tourists on the Coast." He drew a long breath and looked at Carroll mildly.

"Idea's fine, if we can put it over. It'll take a little time, but then, time's plenty around here. We been workin' two years to land our men, and I guess another month or two ——"

"Ninety days," Cole gloomily corrected him. "Eighty-nine, I mean, if your clock's right."

"Uh-huh. Ten minutes to one. Well, I ain't in the habit of havin' jail breaks, but if a prisoner should get away from me, I'd have deputies out after him, you bet ——" One fat eyelid went down in leisurely fashion and lifted again.

Cole stared, glanced sidelong at Carroll

who was studying him with expressionless intentness, looked at Saunders again and grinned.

"I'd sure give them a run for their money," he boldly declared. "Say, I'm the toughest guy that ever stole a horse! Jails can't hold me——"

"This one will for a while yet," Saunders dryly interrupted his boasting. "Think he's tough enough, Ed?"

"Cole's all right," Carroll answered gruffly. "He'd go through with anything he started, but it's too damn risky. We better not let him tackle it."

"I want it risky!" Cole cried eagerly. "I can see the whole play now. If Mr. Saunders means——"

"I mean you're going back to your apartment, young feller, and stay there and keep your mouth shut. Ed and I'll have to do a pile of thinkin' and schemin' on this proposition. We make a fluke of it, and our goose is cooked at next election. Keep this all behind your teeth, and maybe——"

"Damn ticklish," Carroll grumbled.

"Look here! I *know* I can put it over. They gave me the name, and I sure can play

the game. All I want is a chance. I ——"

"Come on, and keep your trap closed. I got a feller down at the end of the hall that's kinda tough himself. Stole a rifle and watch from the blacksmith, and he's layin' out a sixty-day sentence. Used to ride for John Roper." He paused to let that sink in. "Maybe in a day or two I'll put you in with him; see how tough yuh are. And by the way, Dick, that looks after the boarders, is a mouthy cuss that turns whichever way the wind blows. Good-hearted, but what goes into his head comes out on his tongue. You couldn't keep his mouth shut with copper rivets. Comes in handy for me — I sure know what the prisoners look and feel — and *talk*."

"I get you."

"Don't ever be misled by his seemin' friendly," Saunders warned him further. "If you're goin' to put this thing over at all, you got to be a horse thief waking and sleeping, young feller. You dassen't let up at no time, except in this office with me. And if I act harsh, you take it like a horse thief and a bad egg generally."

"I understand, Mr. Saunders. Don't

think I'll fall down on the job. How could I? It's for — Dad."

"Uh-huh. But the C Bar L is no friend of yours from now on, remember."

"Too damn dangerous," Ed Carroll protested for the third time. "They'd cut his throat quick as they'd stick a pig."

"And I'd see them hang and never turn a hair," Cole said with an implacable kind of calm. "I want you to know, both of you, that my business from now on is to find the men that killed my father and made it look as if he shot himself because he was too big a coward to face a little hard luck. That's why I left in the first place. I couldn't stand the thought of folks knowing my father sneaked out of life the way he did. If I can prove to people that he didn't — that he was murdered and his — his good name tramped in the mud — don't you suppose I'll go the limit? You needn't worry, either of you. I'm not going to make any slip-up."

"No, I guess you won't. Well, we'll see. Go quiet, kid." Saunders opened the door and waited for Cole. The two went out so silently that even Carroll, who was listening in the office, heard no sound in the corridor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

COLE PLAYS THE GAME

TWO days later, a sullen youth slouched into the large cell at the end of the corridor, his entrance accelerated noticeably by a push from behind. The door clanged shut behind him with a spiteful definiteness, and Saunders met the impotent snarl with a scowl of disfavor.

"You keep up that midnight cussing," he said sourly, "and Shorty, here, will kick your ribs in. I've had about enough outa you. Little more and you'll go in the cage, on bread and water diet for a while. Don't take any lip from him, Shorty. He's got a lame shoulder, and I guess you can handle him if it comes to a showdown. Kept me awake two nights now, so I'm turning him in for you to tame him."

Shorty McGuire, the brief possessor of a rifle and watch he had not earned, licked a thumb and began mechanically slipping off three cards from his worn deck while he eyed his new cell mate.

"Aw, he'll be all right, Sheriff. Goes kinda tough when a feller's left all by himself like that. I cussed considerable, myself, first week or so in here; all the difference is, I was off down here at the end, where you couldn't hear me. Say, I swore m'self hoarse!" His rather close-set eyes of commonplace blue turned measuringly upon Cole, and he swept up his layout of solitaire with a sigh of anticipation. "How about a little game of coon-can or something, stranger? Solitary sure gets monotonous after a while. Couldn't we have a table in here, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Saunders gave a grunt and walked back up the corridor, and Shorty listened with his head cocked sidewise until he was certain the office door had closed. Then he looked at Cole and grinned.

"You don't wanta mind *him,*" he said in a tone meant to be reassuring. "His bark's worse 'n his bite, any day. I bet he don't put a guy in the cage once in six months; not unless they're crazy or the like of that. He just makes threats. My name's Shorty McGuire, what's yours?"

"I've been calling myself Cole. Kinda like the sound of it too. Better use it," Cole

said, in none too friendly a tone. He took a turn up and down the cell, which was double the size of his own and could at a pinch accommodate four prisoners. "Damn this town!" he abruptly explained. "I meant to make it up into Montana before cold weather."

"Aw, fergit it!" Shorty urged sympathetically. "I ain't hangin' around because I'm in love with the life, m'self." He was shuffling the cards slowly, evidently waiting for his invitation to be accepted.

Cole halted beneath the barred window which was set into the stone wall six feet from the floor. He stood looking up at it, his eyes narrowed. After a minute of perfect quiet he reached up with his well arm and felt the bars one by one, gripping each and giving it a tentative shake. Shorty laughed unmirthfully as he watched.

"Nope, they don't rattle in the wind," he dryly observed. "Not enough to keep yuh awake nights, anyway. I made sure of that long ago."

Cole turned and looked at him morosely.

"How long you been in?" he asked sourly.

"Me? Four weeks tomorra. She's the

lonesomest damn' jail I ever seen. Too dead to stink, this town is. All this room in here, and nobody canned once a month. Come on and let's start a series. Twenty-one games — and the loser — got any money on you? "

"What do you suppose, after that damn pot-belly went through me? " growled Cole.

"Yeah, same here. Afraid we might git extravagant." Shorty pulled down the corners of his mouth in a sardonic grin. "Well, we'll keep tabs with matches, till Dick comes, and then maybe we can talk him outa some dry beans. Low deals — come on, cut." And when Cole did not move toward him, "Aw, what's the use of fightin' your head about it? " he remonstrated. "Don't make the time go no quicker. I know, buhlieve me! I tried it."

"It's the feeling that I had to go and slip up on a bad break in the dark," Cole said, as if the thought literally forced itself into speech. "I've managed to steer away from the jug, when —— And to get caught up on a blunder like that ——"

"Yeah, I know that side of it too," sympathized Shorty. "Why, look at me! Had to

go and swipe a darn 30.30 I didn't really need — found out afterwards the rifling was all wore out, at that! — and a watch that lost twenty minutes a day! And get nabbed! Darn that lousy Swede, it makes me sore every time I think of it. But then," he added by way of extenuation, "I was pickled to the ears or I'd 'a' knowed better. Come on, cut for deal."

Apathetically Cole cut the cards to a ten spot. Shorty cut a trey, licked his thumb and dealt the cards swiftly, ten to each. They began the silent game, making the spreads on the space of lumpy mattress between them on the cot they used for seats and table as well. Cole had last played coon-can with Red Billings at the C Bar L, and a wave of homesickness swept over him; but he shut the memory sternly from his mind and calmly picked up the queen of clubs, spread it with jack and king and discarded the trey of diamonds which Shorty promptly seized, making a spread of treys.

Twice during the day Cole went carefully over the room, examining walls, floor, the ceiling which he could not reach, of course, and giving especial attention to the window.

Shorty watched him and thumbed his prized deck of cards.

"You ain't used to bein' cooped," he remarked, when Cole was making his third attempt to shake a window bar.

"And I ain't going to get used to it, either. You can bank your sweet life on that," Cole retorted. "Let me up on your shoulders, Shorty. I want to take a look outside."

Shorty obligingly complied.

"She backs up against some old sheds and then comes the hill. On a dark night——"

"Sss!" hissed Shorty, and eased Cole down to the floor. "Wish we had some beans," he said cheerfully, pulling Cole back to the cot and pushing him down with the flat of his palm. "I'd try you a whirl at poker, old-timer. Sky limit and the joker runnin' wild. Your deal." He sent a stealthy glance over his shoulder to the door.

"Four tabs—I need 'em in my business and I'm goin' after 'em right now."

He was talking for an eavesdropper, but his caution was apparently wasted, for the sound in the corridor ceased. Shorty strolled over to the door and peered out, listening.

"You never know what that damned mealy-mouthed Dick is up to," he made pettish comment, as he resumed the only pastime they had save reading. "Don't go shakin' them bars all the time, Cole. There ain't a chance in the world of loosening 'em."

Cole did not reply to that, but the gleam in his eyes as he glanced up from his hand caused Shorty to overlook a king when he was making a spread of kings; which was unusual, for Shorty seldom overlooked anything that was to his advantage.

Day followed dull day, and the two struck up a certain degree of friendship, natural to companions in solitude. As became the rôle he was playing, Cole cursed his ill luck with consistent venom and spent hours in pacing the roomy cell and devising wild plans of escape which Shorty discouraged. They talked of many things, but never of the Muleshoe or the Black Rim country or John Roper, because Shorty mentioned none of these and Cole was afraid to take the initiative.

He studied Shorty — and sometimes he felt an uncomfortable conviction that Shorty was likewise studying him; that he was watching and weighing him and only partly believing

in him; that behind that careless manner of being willing to take what came and make the best of it lay Shorty's real self, with many things of which he did not speak. A strange, intent look came sometimes into his eyes. What it signified Cole was not able to decide, but he did know that right here in the very beginning of his grim rôle he was forced to play to a critical audience of one, and he was not at all certain that he would not hear a catcall of disdain for his poor acting, before the first act was over. He did not put it in exactly that form. He told himself that he didn't know whether he got over with Shorty, and that he would have to get over now or give up the crazy scheme altogether; because Shorty was not the fool he sometimes appeared to be.

Inaction was maddening. There were times when Cole doubted whether Saunders and Carroll were not making a fool of him. There were days when he lay on his cot with his face hidden on his folded arms and gave himself up to black despair while he pretended to be asleep. Those times, Shorty read wild west stories and cursed fluently their glaring inaccuracies, or played solitaire with

endless patience while he hummed vile paraphrases of popular songs.

Saunders never came near. Dick, the cheerful guard, brought food twice a day and joked with Shorty and doled out matches and cigarettes to both and went his way again, whistling down the corridor and out into the sunny world that to Cole seemed shut away forever, a mythical world of rolling hills and wind-swept levels and sun and moon and stars. He could not see that he was accomplishing anything at all, except that in spite of themselves the days did drag past to where they could be checked off in his mind as that much gone from his sentence. But three months of it — *three months,* while his father's murderer roamed free!

But one thing was accomplished which should have gratified him. His sprained shoulder was recovering its full strength in that time of forced quiet, and he forgot all about the stiffness and pain in his neck.

He was lying so, with his face hidden, when voices came down the corridor; Saunders' voice, and another that tingled his nerves so that a prickly chill went from his scalp to his toes and left him with a surge of hot blood

and then a chill that seemed to center somewhere in his throat.

"Calls himself Cole, eh? That's gall, taking a man's horses and his name too. Think he'll talk? Young Lawson 'll be tickled to death if I get his horses back for him. He had some money too ——"

How plainly Billy Parrish's voice came down the corridor! It was to warn him, of course, and prepare him for the visit. They were afraid he might betray himself to Shorty McGuire. Not that it would matter a great deal, except that Shorty's sentence expired before Cole's, and when he was released he would probably talk —

"Hey, wake up, Cole," Shorty was saying in his ear. "You got company."

"Tell 'em to go to hell," mumbled Cole, and twitched away from Shorty's fingers. "Lemme alone. I'm sleepy."

Why hadn't they waited until it was darker in there? But when he moved his head so that one eye could look out into the room, he saw that the hours had dragged themselves broken-backed to late afternoon, and the cell was almost dusky. He wanted it so. He did not want Billy Parrish to see his face too plainly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE DEPUTY FROM BLACK RIM

MEETING Billy Parrish without look or word of recognition was one of the most difficult experiences Cole had ever known, but he accomplished it somehow. A flicker of Billy's eyes, a twitching of his lips, and he was stiff, uncompromising, hostile. But big Bill Saunders inexorably pushed to the front of the conversation, chewing his inevitable toothpick and darting quick glances around the cell as he spoke.

"This is a deputy sheriff from Black Rim County, Cole," he announced in his rumbling drawl. "He says you stole four horses over that way and brought 'em into Crater County. Says you took 'em from young Lawson; C Bar L horses."

"That's news to me," grunted Cole, turning away because he could not bear to face Billy Parrish in that guise.

"Young Cole Lawson wrote back from Seattle and told about it, and described you to a T. Parrish here can identify the horses."

"Let him, then!"

"You tell where the other three are, and mebbe there won't be any charge brought against you. What he wants now is to get the kid's horses back."

"That's nothing to me," Cole said shortly, backing away to sit down on his cot.

"Ain't, huh? Well, I guess you better come on out to the office where we can have a little talk with yuh." Saunders' tone was grim as he unlocked the door. "I guess you'll find out it's quite a lot to yuh. Come on outa there!"

He looked so bulky and capable a representative of that dread thing, the Law, that Cole's shoulders drooped a little as he glared at the two without moving. It was not until Saunders took a threatening step into the room that Cole got up and went out sullenly. Even Shorty must see that he had no choice in the matter, he thought, as he glanced back over his shoulder.

"My God, Cole, you're looking thin! What you been doing to yourself?" Billy Parrish muttered solicitously as Cole brushed by him. "I never saw yuh look ——"

"Shut up!" Cole warned him under his

breath. "That fellow in there 'll hear you."

Billy glanced over his shoulder to where Shorty stood watching them go, and turned toward Saunders who was coming behind. Whatever he had to say must wait until they were safely shut into the office, he remembered.

It must have been a good deal, for it was a full hour before Saunders brought Cole back to the cell. Shorty was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his hands loosely clasped between them, staring abstractedly at the floor. He looked up under his eyebrows as Cole came in, his eyes lingering inquiringly on Cole's sullen face.

"Well, did you cough up the information?" Shorty's voice was tinged with mockery. It was like the expression Cole sometimes saw in his eyes; the look that made Cole wonder if he were quite convincing in his rôle of bad man.

"They know already where one horse is." Cole pulled himself together and with a long breath of weariness slipped on the mask. "I rode him into town. That — damn' deputy identified him as a C Bar L horse."

"Yeah? That makes it look kinda bad for you, don't it?"

Cole started to roll a cigarette with fingers that shook. For answer he shrugged his shoulders as if words were unnecessary.

"C Bar L — that's the outfit that went broke, ain't it? Old man shot himself; blowed his brains out. Was you there?"

Cole was moistening the edge of paper with his tongue, and he stared at Shorty over his two hands, his eyes black and shining in the half light of the room.

"I didn't have to be," he said evenly while he shaped the little tube. "Young Lawson started off this way with his horses. I — met him the other side of Thunder Pass."

"You sure took a chance," was Shorty's comment. "Gosh, it was lonesome while you was gone! Thought maybe that — deputy from Black Rim was goin' to glom you and take you away from here."

"Nothing like that. They tried to get me to tell 'em where the other three horses are."

"Did yuh?"

"No." Cole sat down and smoked moodily. Shorty got up and began walking up and down, up and down, head bent and shoulders

sagged forward. At first Cole paid no attention to him; but the clocklike regularity with which Shorty's booted feet passed within Cole's range of vision finally registered a mechanical kind of attention on Cole's mind, and pulled his thoughts slowly away from a heartsick dwelling upon the Black Rim country and the grisly tragedy of the C Bar L. The fact forced itself upon his mind that Shorty was upset about something.

Did Shorty possess any guilty knowledge of the operation of this Crater County gang? It did not seem so, and Saunders had not been surprised when Cole reported that he had gleaned nothing whatever from his cell mate. He had merely remarked that Shorty could probably do a lot for Cole after he got out of jail; knowing Roper as Shorty must, from having worked for him, his word would go a long way toward convincing Roper that Cole was an outlaw from some other section of the range. Cole had told Billy and Saunders that Shorty was too easy-going a type to be mixed up in anything outside the law, and that he lacked the quick wit which one of Roper's gang must have.

Now, Cole's abstraction was broken by

Shorty's restless pacing to and fro. Three steps on the floor, and Shorty's feet went past. Another step and a turn; here came the feet again. Small feet — the smallest Cole had ever seen on a man so tall. Shorty must be close to six feet in his boots. Three steps, a turn, three steps back, and the boots going by; left heel run over on the outside, right heel worn on the inside edge — Shorty did that by always standing "hip-shot," his weight resting almost entirely on his left leg — shiny streak on the counters where his spurs had rubbed, bootlegs stitched in red thread, an oblong scroll pattern such as Cole had written over and over in his copy books at school during the half-hour writing lesson.

He wished he dared talk frankly with Shorty, and tell him just what was the problem that faced him. Knowing John Roper, Shorty might be able to give him good advice. He had even suggested to Saunders that he confide in Shorty, because he felt that Shorty liked him and half suspected that he was not so black as he painted himself. Shorty was a good-natured, harmless sort, like nine tenths of the riders on the range. He had probably worked for Roper and never dreamed that

the ranch was a blind and that Roper's real business lay deeper and far more hidden than Crater County knew.

Back and forth, and the feet crossing rhythmically the square of stone floor directly before Cole, who finished his cigarette and sat erect. Almost as if that were a signal, Shorty stopped and faced him, his lips parted in a half smile.

" Gosh, that throwed a scare into me, havin' you gone so long," he said, when Cole looked up at him inquiringly. " Had the blue willies ever since. Sure they ain't plannin' on takin' you outa here? "

" I guess they couldn't do that till my ninety days are up," Cole said, after a moment of hesitation. " That's a long time from now. I'll maybe get a chance to beat it before then."

" Sh-sh," warned Shorty, whose keen ears had detected a sound in the corridor. " Dick's takin' his time to-night, but I guess that's our supper."

His guess was correct. They ate in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. But afterwards Shorty threw off his moodiness and wanted to talk about the only incident that

had broken into the monotony of their cloisteral days.

"If you didn't open up this time and tell 'em," he began abruptly, "they're liable to haul you out there again and try to make yuh come through, don't yuh think?"

"They wouldn't get any more than they've got now."

"Didn't they say anything about you thinkin' it over and maybe decidin' to tell 'em to-morrow?"

"No. I got the impression that Black Rim deputy is leaving town in the morning. The sheriff said something about going along."

This, it happened, was the truth. Billy and Saunders were planning to visit the Harris ranch and have a long, confidential talk with Mrs. Harris and Dorothy. Cole's earnest assurance that they were his friends and could be trusted with the true story — which he secretly wanted them to hear, now that he knew the truth about his father — had done much to influence the sheriff.

Billy Parrish had enthusiastically suggested that the women be permitted to visit the jail and smuggle a hack-saw blade in to Cole,

perhaps in a watermelon or something. He had argued that a woman hates to see any man she likes in jail, and even Roper's gang would accept their coming as perfectly natural. But Cole had talked against that plan. He did not want Dorothy to see him behind the bars.

"Say, didn't that deputy recognize you, Cole? He sure had a funny look on his face when you went to the door."

"He thought I'd been passing myself off for young Lawson, and he wanted to see if I could get away with it, I guess."

"I know, I heard what he said, comin' down the hall. Say, what's he goin' to leave town for, if you didn't tell him where the horses is?"

"I didn't tell, but they cross-questioned me and got enough so they think they can find 'em, all right. They're going to look."

"Where's that?"

"That's out at Harris' place." There was no reason why Shorty should not know, Cole reflected. It would furnish the reason why Mrs. Harris or Dorothy should come to visit him. "I was there, and they know I had the horses there." He sighed, more than half

sincerely. "I wish I coulda got word out to Mrs. Harris," he added.

"Why not the girl?" Shorty slyly hinted.

"Or Dorothy. They're good friends of mine. They'd help me. Maybe they will, anyway," he forced himself to add hopefully. "I asked the sheriff to bring in my war bag so I'll have a change of clothes; maybe ——"

"You sure they're going out to-morrow?" Shorty insisted.

"Well, they said so. If they do, maybe the women will think of some way ——"

Shorty came over and sat down beside Cole, laying a hand on his shoulder with an impressive gesture.

"I got a scheme that beats settin' here maybein'," he said, speaking in a guarded undertone. "You've been talkin' about bustin' outa here till I've got the itch myself to go."

He got up and went to the door, looked out and listened, and came back again.

"How?" Cole looked up at him, startled. It was the first time Shorty had ever shown any great interest in the idea of escape.

Shorty hesitated, looking down at him. He shook his head as he seated himself again on the cot.

"How, I ain't tellin' yet," he grinned. "You been wantin' to go so bad, when I do let yuh in on it, I expect you to play right up. You've got every reason for gettin' outa here; me, I'm all right, but I wouldn't want to stay here alone after you went. This afternoon showed me how I've got used to you around. Why, I felt like bellerin', like a cow that's lost her calf!"

"Thanks. I didn't know I was that important."

"Well, I like yuh, dawg-gone it. You're a damn' good coon-can player, and besides — Now, how have you been figurin' on gettin' away, once you got outa here? Being a stranger ——"

"I thought I'd maybe find John Roper's place, and ask him for that job he offered me," Cole said deliberately. "I know he's no friends of Saunders, for he told me so. He said the sheriff stands in with a bunch of thieves that got away with some horses of his. I don't know anything about that — maybe I believed it and maybe I didn't. But whichever way it is, Roper and Saunders don't hit it off so good. I guess he'd kinda keep me outa sight for a while, don't yuh think?"

"Sure. I know Roper like a book. Rode for him, two round-ups. Know how to find his place?"

Cole admitted that he did not, and Shorty grinned again.

"I guess you need me in your business, kid," he dryly commented, as he got out his cards and seated himself cross-legged on the floor where the light was strongest. "Want a game?"

Cole was in no mood for cards, and said so; whereupon Shorty resigned himself to the monotony of solitaire, spreading his cards on the floor and whistling absently to himself as he played endlessly, humped forward like a decrepit range version of Buddha, letting chances go by as the cards slip, slip, slipped under his thumb. Shorty's wits, too, were wool-gathering that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SHORTY SPRINGS A SURPRISE

FOR a while Cole watched him listlessly, his thoughts wandering here and there over his immediate past and the ominous haze of the future, but occupying themselves mostly with Billy Parrish and the things he had said. It had been like jabbing an old bruise to see Billy, but it was good to hear all the news about the boys, and to know just what had been done to establish Cole firmly in his alibi at Seattle.

Cole had written to Billy (Saunders had mysteriously furnished him with stationery from a cheap hotel near the water front as a convincing detail) and had sent various messages to the boys and a beaded watch fob for Billy himself. So now, having received the letter and passed it around in the Lava pool hall, where range men were wont to foregather, Black Rim was firmly convinced that young Cole Lawson was on his way to Alaska on board the old *City of Seattle,* and that he had been held up ten miles from the railroad

and robbed of his horses and camp outfit, but had continued his journey nevertheless. He had not wanted Black Rim to have the laugh on him, he had said. He had beaten his way through on a freight train to save his money, and he was going to ship as a deck hand for the same reason. He darned the climate of Seattle just as any sagebrusher would, and had declared he was not coming back until he had made a stake and could buy back the old home ranch. He had given a very good description of the horse thief — which tallied closely with Cole himself — and he had begged Billy to have Ed Carroll get on the fellow's trail.

It was a peach of a letter, Billy had declared, and now half the boys had the Klondike fever, and it looked as if Red and Gene might go; only they were debating over working through fall round-up first. Musing on the triumph of that epistolary hoax, Cole felt a boyish thrill of pride in his handiwork.

Then Billy had told of a stranger rider who had appeared in Lava and seemed to be looking for work, though not with any great anxiety to find it. Since strangers were persons of especial interest to Carroll, he had quietly investigated this one and found that until very

lately he had been a Muleshoe man. He had shown a suspicious interest in Black Rim affairs, Billy said, and although none of the boys knew there was any doubt cast up on the C Bar L suicide, they did not like Dirk Tracey and gave him the cold shoulder. Billy had described him to Cole, but without learning anything new, since Cole had not seen him. To Cole's instant suspicion that Tracey might be the murderer, Billy had replied that Carroll had established an alibi that evening for the fellow. He had been seen in Lava too late in the afternoon to have had any possible hand in the killing.

"But I believe I saw the man that did it," Billy continued. "You remember I was riding over beyond the butte, that afternoon. As I was coming home, swinging around to the Lava road, I met a fellow cutting across country toward the butte, coming from over this way. He rode up out of a hollow and crossed the trail in front of me. I didn't think anything of it at the time — in fact, I forgot all about him till I got to working with Carroll. Now, after all I've heard about the layout over here, I believe he's the one we want. He was riding an AJ horse, and that's Roper's

brand, according to Mr. Saunders here. The AJ had been vented, but the new brand wasn't clear enough for me to tell what it was, just glancing at it that way. It was on the left shoulder. The horse was a chestnut sorrel with a white nose and a white stocking on the left hind leg. When you get out, Cole, keep an eye open for that horse and if you see him, let Mr. Saunders know as quick as you can — if I ain't around. I believe that was the murderer I saw that day. He could ride up over the end of the butte to our fence, tie his horse in the bushes and come down the gulley to the back of the house — and not a man on the ranch know a thing about it; unless he was in the office," he added with dropped voice.

Now, as he sat abstractedly watching the fall of the cards, Cole became aware of a growing temptation to ask Shorty if he knew of such a horse. There could be no harm in it. Cole felt fairly secure now in the part he was playing, and Shorty could not possibly fathom the reason for his interest. He might think Cole had seen and coveted the animal, or that he had seen the rider and was curious about him. He might think anything except the truth.

Cole shifted his position and sighed. Should he take a chance and ask Shorty? Saunders had warned him to be careful, to confide in no man until he was given permission. But this wasn't confiding, Cole reflected. It was simply asking a question which any range man might plausibly ask another. He would say that he had seen the horse in Burroback Valley, or down beyond the Sinks, toward the Harris place. But perhaps he had better wait awhile. There was nothing to be gained now, even if Shorty could name the man for him; he would still be obliged to wait until Saunders came back.

So he took the matter to bed and slept on the question. He milled it over during a long and gloomy forenoon, and decided that he would say nothing to Shorty about it until they were in the open — if they ever got out, which Cole was beginning to doubt when the time dragged so intolerably. With that, he picked up a magazine and tried to interest himself in a story. But between his eyes and the page rode the mysterious horseman on the chestnut sorrel, and words held no meaning whatever.

"What's on your mind, Cole?" Shorty

looked up from his endless game of solitaire. "You're full of talk as a clam, to-day."

"Oh, nothing." Cole flung the magazine against the wall and sat up, reaching for his smoking material. "You know this country pretty well, don't you, Shorty?"

"Why?" Shorty countered, an ace poised in his fingers while he looked at Cole.

"Oh, nothing much — only I thought you might know who rides a chestnut sorrel horse with a white nose, white stocking on the left hind leg, vented AJ brand and another one blurred."

Shorty laid down the ace of clubs, picked up the deuce from one of the long rows before him, placed that upon the ace, releasing the trey of diamonds which he placed on top of its deuce; looked the layout over carefully for other chances to build to his aces, glanced at the deck in his hand, licked his thumb and slipped off three cards, then three more, and got the trey of clubs for his deuce.

"What's that again?" he asked, glancing up at Cole. "A chestnut sorrel with white nose and —" he snapped a thumb and finger vexedly. "Dammit, I let the four of diamonds go by me; that's another one for old

Sol. Gimme that description again, will yuh, Cole?" He swept the cards together and began to shuffle them idly, his eyes upon Cole's brooding face.

"N — I ain't sure," he said doubtfully, when Cole had repeated the description. "When we make our get-away, though, I can prob'ly find out and let yuh know. What about it? Got your eye on that particular horse?"

"I'd sure like to know who rides him!"

"Oh. It's the man instead of the horse you want to know about the worst. Well, I'll try and let yuh know. Looks like you don't get any calls to-day. They musta beat it outa town, all right." Shorty's voice carried a note of suppressed eagerness.

"I guess they did. Don't you remember seeing that horse over in this country, Shorty?"

"I dunno — what fer gaited horse? What's his build and weight?"

"I don't know," Cole was obliged to confess, and Shorty gave a grunt and went back to his game.

Hours passed leadenly. It grew too dark for Shorty to play, and he sat on the edge of

his cot and smoked, just as Cole sat on the edge of his own cot and smoked; two silent, somber men, weary of inaction and their own thoughts, lacking that perfect confidence which would have permitted unguarded conversation. Silence and brooding thought.

The light in the corridor snapped on, and Dick came whistling down past the empty cells on either side. Now he was looking in, their supper borne on one arm. Shorty got up, walked lazily forward as Dick unlocked the door, and pulled it open.

"Welcome as the flowers in May!" drawled Shorty, yawning and stretching his arms upward as Dick came in.

Dick grinned, stooped a little, setting down his burden, and Shorty's right fist came down with stunning force against Dick's ear. The coffee tilted perilously as Dick crumpled at the knees, but Shorty saved it from spilling more than a few spoonfuls. As the guard rolled over on the floor, Shorty bent and pulled the gun from its holster on Dick's belt.

"Hand me your handkerchief, Cole. I oughta blow the son of a gun's brains out — but the sound might carry." Shorty's voice was cool, unhurried as if he were vocally de-

bating the wisdom of using a certain card. He stood up, looking at Cole. "Well, the way's open," he said quizzically. "You've been belly-achin' to git outa here; now come on!"

"I never wanted to go out that way, by half killing a man when he wasn't looking." Nevertheless, Cole gave Shorty his big silk handkerchief, and stood looking down at the limp and apparently lifeless Dick.

"You won't go out no other way, till you're let out," Shorty replied grimly. "Jail doors don't blow open with the wind, far as I ever heard." He was tying Dick's wrists together behind his back and including a leg of the stationary cot in the bond. Dick's own handkerchief served for a gag, and Dick's gun belt fitted very nicely around Shorty's middle. Now he hurriedly filled his pocket with bread, gulped down a few swallows of coffee and looked at Cole.

"Well, if Saunders don't meet us walkin' out, we'll be in the clear before yuh know it," he said calmly. "Get your hat and coat, wherever they are, and come on. You don't need a gun; we're goin' among friends."

Cole hesitated, looking down at the uncon-

scious man on the floor. A vivid recollection of that other terrible figure lying at his feet not so long ago turned him white and sick. The brutality of the thing repelled him, made him almost hate Shorty who stood there in the door waiting for him.

The feeling passed. There was work for him outside, and as Shorty had said, the way was open. But he wanted a gun — Shorty did not know how terribly important it might be for Cole to have a weapon. He followed Shorty out of the cell and down the corridor, turned aside into the office and armed himself. A minute later the two walked boldly out of the front door, stopped to light cigarettes in the dusk — their eyes glancing this way and that along the street as they did so — and went their way along the trail that led to the sheriff's stable. If they were observed it was without suspicion, and if Shorty was recognized, no one questioned his right to be abroad. But at that hour the little town of Crater was eating its various suppers and the street was nearly empty. Afterward no one remembered even seeing them leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"I GOT HIM IN A CELL ——"

FOUR quiet-mannered, hard-faced men followed Ed Carroll down the steps of the midnight train from the East when it stopped at Crater for water. One by one, four sacked saddles followed the limp mail sack to the station platform. Up the track in the starlight the big engine gasped and drank thirstily for its climb over the mountains, and stared with its one brilliant eye down the track toward the stockyards. Down in the little town a dog barked in a shrill, tireless monotone, but otherwise the seat of Crater County's government gave no sign of life or betrayed any interest whatever in through trains. The night operator came out with the train orders whipping in his fingers, distributed the thin sheets of paper to engineer and conductor, picked up the mail sack and went in where it was warmer — for even in late summer the nights can be nippy in that high altitude, and the wind that crept down off High Trail was keen and searching.

"I guess Saunders didn't get my wire," Carroll remarked to the man nearest him, and peered all up and down the platform. "We better go right on over, I guess — unless you boys 'd rather go to the hotel. I guess that's what we better do; get four or five hours' sleep, anyway, and have a good long day before us to-morrow."

"What'll we do with our saddles?" one thin man perfunctorily inquired. "Leave 'em here, or take 'em with us?"

"Better take 'em along," another advised, as he selected one and shouldered it. "Me, I like to keep my ridin' gear right where I can get at it."

"Punchers coming in to work on round-up," the night operator mentally identified the group that straggled off down the street into town. "Wish I was one of them; this inside work ——" He watched them enviously, for they walked in a glow of swift-moving adventure conjured in panoramas by his own longing. He saw them galloping far and free over the hills, or scurrying here and there in the valleys, "working" herds of cattle driven down from the high summer grazing grounds. He saw them laughing around camp fires,

sleeping rolled in their blankets, their faces to the stars.

He saw them as they were not, but that is the way with men who carry the tang of romance in their blood. The night operator had spent one summer on a cattle ranch and hurt his side so that he had to give up the life and go back to brass-pounding; and a range hat and high-heeled boots would always spell round-ups to him.

The five whom he envied clumped into the hotel where a dim light shone in the office. They did not talk of round-ups; they did not talk of anything but beds and early breakfasts, and when they trailed after the sleepy landlord to their rooms they went wearily, with nothing whatever to say, except:

"Well, see yuh in the morning," from Carroll, as he turned in a doorway.

"Sure — call me if I don't show up," from the man who wanted his saddle handy.

If the others spoke at all no one heard them. And yet——

The man who wanted his saddle was an ex-ranger from Texas, as was the other one with black eyes and hair, who drawled in his speech. The short man with a pudgy nose

and small, pinched-in mouth had a record as long as his arm in Montana, and the little fellow with face like a hawk was Carroll's star trailer and sic'em deputy. At least, Carroll called Frost his sic'em deputy. The night operator who loafed up in the station and dreamed of round-ups would have thrilled to his toes had he known who those nocturnal travelers in the high-heeled boots really were.

They rose at dawn and trailed Carroll silently to a restaurant which catered to early birds like themselves, and they drank black coffee with more than a plenty of sugar, ate ham and eggs and hot biscuits and syrup, and had nothing whatever to say. The day thus begun as it should be, with plenty of fuel for their energies which might be needed almost any time, they followed Carroll across the street to the county jail, where Bill Saunders slept in a meager room adjoining the office.

His eyes bloodshot from loss of sleep and riding in the wind, Bill Saunders stood in the middle of the office and stared in bovine calm from one to the other of his early visitors. Frost he knew. Tex Allen he had seen in a courtroom. The other two were briefly intro-

duced, and his eyes said that he had heard of them.

"Parrish is in bed yet, I guess," he volunteered in his rumbling voice, looking at Carroll. "Made a little trip yesterday, and didn't get in till about two this morning. He's stopping over at the hotel. Want me to ——"

"I'll go get him," the little hawk-faced man offered, and was gone.

If Saunders was curious, he did not say so. He had the air of waiting for court to open; but he didn't wait long, for Billy came, unwashed and uncombed, and hitching up his belt as he walked. He, too, was curious, but unlike Saunders he looked it.

"Now, I guess we're all set. You didn't get my wire, Bill?"

Saunders shook his head.

"No matter. I didn't say anything, except that I was coming. Well, these men, Tex and Charley Couch, have been workin' on the case off and on for a year. I told you, Bill, I had men out. Frosty and Nathe have been on it since Lawson was killed, and Parrish I deputized and sent up here to look after the kid while we got ready to spring the trap." Car-

roll paused, apparently wanting to condense his information as much as possible and finding it difficult with such a wealth of interesting details in his mind.

"We've got the connection, all right, between Roper's gang and Lawson. Roper is just the local head over here — the real boss lives in Kansas City, and the officers back there are pullin' in the slack on him, so all we've got to clear up is our own end of it. Well, it's a jumbled-up mess of stolen stock shipped out with the C Bar L beef, and other stock that Lawson had bought — all told I guess they got into old Cole pretty deep before he caught on. After that, it seems they tried to blackmail him in a quiet kinda way. There was considerable arguin' back and forth, and it looks like old Cole had visitors in his office more 'n once that the C Bar L didn't know anything about. But that's neither here nor there. What we're workin' on now is that last caller he had."

"You get him, yet?" Billy Parrish was showing impatience.

"We expect to get him. Dirk Tracey has been trailed to the Muleshoe and from there to Roper's place — a spy in camp comes in

handy sometimes. We also," he added slowly, "know who it was you met that day, Billy, riding that AJ horse. We know his name and we've got his description and we know he's a Roper man. We came over to pick him up before he gets outa the country, and we came in a bunch, because we want the rest of the gang too."

"Count me in," said Billy, and Carroll nodded.

"The way we've got it doped, this fellow didn't go over there expecting to kill Lawson. If he had, he'd have been a little more careful not to meet anybody on the way, and he would have had a knife, most likely — if he was crazy enough to kill a man in his own house with men on the ranch that was liable to come in any minute almost. He probably went over with some message from Roper, asking for something, most likely. You know old Cole, Billy. Get him pushed just about so far, and he'd out-balk a government mule.

"Must have been something like that took place that night, and this fellow lost his temper. I figure that he struck Cole and knocked him down. Then, either he was scared of what old Cole would do when he got

up, or the gang wanted him outa the way anyhow and he thought this was a good chance — he grabbed Lawson's gun and shot him in the mouth. He knew it would pass for suicide; or he had every reason in the world to think it would. Here was that mortgage foreclosed — it was the first thing any one would think of. Things had come to a show-down, it looks like.

"But the fellow slipped up on one thing; he didn't know old Cole was left-handed, and he didn't have time to stop and figure out where the bullet would land. So we nailed the suicide idea right there, and when I got to prowling around I found out some other things. That fellow you met on the AJ horse, Billy — did you notice the size of his feet?"

"No-o, I don't believe I did, Ed."

"Well, I guess you wouldn't, just meeting him on horseback that way. Don't matter — I've got the horse checked, and I know who owns him. First, I took particular notice of the tracks into the gulley and on up to the fence. A tall man made 'em, by the length of his steps, and I bet I could pretty near guess the size of his boots too."

"He over in this county, Ed?" Saunders had come to life and was watching Carroll's face unblinkingly.

"He's over in this county somewhere, or he should be. We know he left the Black Rim country the night of the murder, and was riding this way, and that he belongs here. He oughta be here yet, because it's never got out that we know Lawson didn't commit suicide. He's a tall man, five foot ten, anyway. By the size of his tracks, I'd say he wears about a number five boot. Unless he's left the country — he might have got scared out, thinking the kid was on some kind of a clue — he ought to be easy to locate. Know anybody over here, Bill, named Shorty McGuire?"

"Uh-huh. What——"

"Nathe, here, heard something that led him to believe the man's name is Shorty McGuire. Is he tall and got little feet——"

Sheriff Saunders got out of his chair as if he had been stung.

"You don't need any posse to catch *him,* Ed. I don't know the horse, but Shorty's back here in a cell, servin' a sixty-day sentence for petty larceny."

"How long has he been in? Was he at large when Lawson was killed?"

"Uh-huh — no alibi there. I made the arrest on the sixteenth of June."

"Lawson was killed on the twelfth. He didn't know that Cole was over in this country, probably."

"Guess not. He was here in Crater, drinkin' and gamblin' and havin' a good time, and he stole a rifle and watch from the blacksmith down the road. Too drunk to get outa town with the stuff — picked him up in a saloon with the watch in his pocket. Cheap watch, and the rifle wasn't much account either, so sixty days is all he got. Used to ride for Roper, but I don't know what he's been doing the last few months; never saw him around much till lately, when he got into trouble."

Billy Parrish swore a sudden oath and caught Saunders by the arm.

"He that fellow you've got in there with Cole? Billy's voice was harsh with dismay.

"Lord, I ain't no mind reader — how was I to know? Time Shorty was taken in, I didn't even know Lawson was murdered." Saunders turned at the office door and faced

them. "I don't know as I'd tell the kid, for a while yet," he said slowly. "I'll go get Shorty and you can question him, Ed. If he's the one——"

"He's the one, all right," Carroll snapped. "Nathe has checked his moves. I'm ready to make the arrest any time."

"Uh-huh," Saunders assented, and started down the corridor. Billy Parrish followed him, wanting to see Cole. Carroll and his men stayed where they were, quietly waiting until they were needed; they did not waste their energies, those seasoned hunters of men.

But they did look up with some interest when Saunders came striding in, half dragging Dick, still bound and with the gag hanging around his neck.

"Guess you'll want your possy after all, Ed," puffed Saunders. "Shorty laid Dick out last night and got away. He must have found out something. Dick says it was Shorty that knocked him out — and Cole's gone with him!"

The four quiet men who had nothing to say rose and looked at big Ed Carroll while they hitched up their belts. Now at last they were interested, for here was work for them to do and they were ready to start.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AN HONEST RANCHER IS ROPER

COLE lifted his head and gazed long at the sky, taking great, lingering breaths of the night air that felt cool on his face as water drawn from a deep well in summer, and as refreshing, after the stale air of indoors. Never had the evening star seemed so bright, nor red Mars following so close. He had almost forgotten how the Big Dipper looked, and the Milky Way he was sure had grown broader and longer since last he saw it. Freedom sang in his blood like old wine, and the shadowy heights of the mountain at his right were like brooding giants standing on guard to give him safe conduct through the night. Even the keen impatience of Eagle for a mad run along the sandy road thrilled him, made him want to whoop and swing his hat high over his head and go racing away down the valley.

But Shorty, riding rather grimly beside him, set the pace at an easy lope; so, however much Eagle might toss his head and

rattle the bit in his teeth, Cole must hold him in. He had no idea how far they would have to ride that night; but after what happened to Dick in the cell Cole thought that Shorty would ride until he was safe — especially since he had the sheriff's extra horse between his knees. Once Cole turned his head and looked at Shorty, and thought that he did not seem highly elated over his escape. Cole suspected that Shorty had made that reckless break for liberty not so much for his own sake as for Cole's.

In that, of course, Cole was right; though he did not dream of the sinister purpose behind Shorty's bold performance.

"We turn off here and take to open country," Shorty said, after they had ridden a mile or two beyond town. "Don't want to meet the sheriff comin' home, and this is the trail he'll probably take."

Cole did not so much mind meeting the sheriff, but he could not tell Shorty that. And, of course, there was Shorty to protect — Cole had to think of that, too. But after this job was done and the Roper gang was safe in jail, he hoped Saunders would be grateful enough to let Shorty down easy. Cole did not want

to see him get in any trouble over this night's work; he had come to like Shorty, and he did not believe he was one of the gang or ever had been.

What Shorty thought on that long, silent ride, no man can say.

Where they went or how many miles they rode, Cole never knew. Shorty was taking the lead, and Shorty knew the way; Cole's mind was taken up with other things — with the millions of stars that were like old friends from whom he had long been parted, and the pleasure of being safe in the saddle once more. But when the first intoxication of his sudden liberty had passed, Cole began to think more soberly of what lay before him, and what he should say and do when he came face to face with Roper and Pete.

Ed Carroll and Saunders had entrusted him with a very important bit of detective work, and he was anxious to make no blunder and to overlook no clue, however slight. He wished that he dared confide in Shorty, who would probably be able to tell him a lot that he needed to know; but until he was absolutely certain of Shorty he must be careful. Carroll had tried hard to impress upon him

the salient truth that silence seldom does any one any harm, but careless speech had plunged nations into war before now; though that is not exactly the manner in which Carroll expressed himself. Cole was recalling that warning when Shorty spoke out of a long silence.

"That AJ sorrel — what was it you want to know about him?"

"Well, I'd like to know who owns him and rides him."

"S'posin' I know 'im — or think I do. S'posin' he's a friend of mine. Any reason why I oughta tell? It's nothing that's liable to git him into trouble, is it?"

Cole lied, but he waited too long before he could bring himself to it. He might as well have said yes instead of no, for all the conviction the denial carried.

"What do you want to know for, then?"

"Curiosity, I guess." It was a lame reply, but Cole could think of nothing better to say.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Shorty reminded him with slow irony.

"Well, I want to see him and have a talk with him, then." Cole felt as if he were

being pushed into a corner. "He knows something I want to find out; or, at least, I was told that he does. If I could see him——"

"Who told yuh? That Black Rim deputy?" Shorty's face was turned toward him, but in the darkness Cole could not read its expression. "If you want to get anything outa me, old-timer, you might as well come clean. Was it that deputy?"

"Something he said, yes." Cole was forced to choose his words carefully now. "He thought I knew something I didn't know. I guess he thought he'd get a lot outa me that he didn't get. And while he was talking and beating around the bush he mentioned this fellow on the AJ horse ——"

"Did, huh?" Shorty commented softly. "What did he say, kid?"

"Not much. Just enough ——"

"No, get to the point. Is he tryin' to locate the fellow?"

"I don't know. No, I guess not. He'd just met him, is all, somewhere that he thought I'd been. I wasn't there ——"

"Where was that? Over in the Black Rim country? Over at the C Bar L, say?"

"What makes you think I meant — over there? I never said ——"

"It was C Bar L horses you stole, wasn't it? Or that he thinks you stole, we'll say. He's a Black Rim man — you said so, and Saunders said so. Why wouldn't I think it was over there he saw him?"

Cole shook his head in the darkness.

"Looks like you're the one that wants to find out something," he charged boldly. "If I was to start in and tell you all I know, you'd be as wise as I am, Shorty — and I might find myself in the middle of a damn' bad fix. Maybe you know the man I want to locate and maybe you don't, but I sure ain't going to trade information, sight unseen. I've got too much at stake."

"Have it your own way — you will, anyhow," Shorty yielded indifferently. "We go single file from here on, and you want to stick close behind my horse, or you're liable to get lost."

This reminded Cole sharply of one other time not so long ago when he had followed a man in the dark, and the comparison struck him unpleasantly. So far as he could see in the starlight, they were descending a rough

slope into a dry river bed, but whether this was another part of the Sinks he did not know and he would not ask. He had not liked Shorty's tone and manner when the AJ horse was being discussed, and he began to feel that he had told too much, perhaps. After all, Shorty had been a Roper man — and the fellow Billy Parrish had met must have been another. Very likely Shorty had told the plain truth when he hinted that the man was a friend of his.

Still, Cole did not suspect the truth, though he was put upon his guard and gave more attention to the route they were following. It did not help him much, for they merely crossed the river bed and climbed the farther bank, and after that they plunged into a labyrinth of gulches and rocky defiles quite as puzzling as had been that maze of rock ledges in the Sinks. They seemed to be climbing slowly, for now and then they rode out upon narrow ridges which gave Cole a vague impression of wide vistas and of mountains in the distance.

Nothing is so baffling perhaps as night riding in strange country. Cole was so certain that they had penetrated deeply into almost

inaccessible country that he was astonished when dawn came and showed him wide, wooded pasture land all about him, and in the middle distance a snug cluster of stables and corrals set close up against a low ridge, with trees and a fair-sized pond and a grassy meadow just beyond. They were riding out from among low hills, he saw, when he looked back, but before him all was open and innocent looking and only moderately prosperous. More like the Harris ranch than the C Bar L, for instance; more like the place one would expect John Roper to own, if one heard and believed what he had said to Mother Harris.

"Well, here we are, kid," said Shorty, and kicked the sheriff's horse into a lope. "Hope breakfast's ready, but I don't see no smoke — maybe John's away somewhere." He turned his head and his mild blue eyes met Cole's questioning look with perfect frankness and the friendly air which had first won Cole to liking him.

"What yuh so big-eyed about?" he grinned. "You been here before, ain't yuh?"

"Not right to the ranch," Cole admitted. "Is this Roper's place?"

"Well," drawled Shorty, "I guess he pays

taxes on it, anyway. Don't see any stir around — there's the dogs, though."

Deep-baying hounds of some powerful cross breed came charging down upon them, four great brutes that looked capable of dragging down a full-grown bull. Shorty forced his horse forward and rode to meet them, calling them by name and cursing them affectionately for the noise they made, and presently they were leaping playfully about him, paying no attention to Cole.

"You ride up here alone and you wouldn't get very close," Shorty threw over his shoulder. "You'd have to shoot all the dogs first. But they're all right when they know yuh. Git down and pull your saddle. Ma Roper ain't up yet, I guess, and John and the boys are gone; but that's all right — we'll git our own breakfast."

While they were unsaddling at the corral nearest the stable, Cole stared furtively around him, feeling slightly crestfallen, if the truth were told. It was not the kind of place he expected to see, in spite of Mother Harris' assurance that John Roper was an honest rancher. Saunders too had told him the same thing, and now the ranch itself gave evidence

of the truth of it. On the surface, at least, Roper was as thrifty and hard-working and law-abiding a man as any in Idaho. Barring the dogs, there was nothing whatever out of the ordinary. There was even a Mrs. Roper to further emphasize the air of respectability of the home.

"That you, Shorty?" she called now from an upstairs window, as they were walking up to the kitchen. "Start a fire and put on the teakettle, and I'll be right down. John went to town, and I don't know where the boys are, but they'll be back some time to-day."

The head disappeared, and Cole followed Shorty into the summer kitchen, wondering whether he had made a fool of himself after all. He could not associate John Roper, as he believed him to be, with a gray-haired wife and a house that stood wide open to any chance rider who strayed that way.

He continued to wonder, all through the preparation of breakfast, which Shorty helped to cook. He sat watching the thin and energetic Ma Roper bestirring herself to set the table for three, while Shorty sliced cold-boiled potatoes into one frying pan and broke fresh-laid eggs into another where bacon was

frying. Stealing and killing did not seem to jibe with this homely life. He wished Billy Parrish were there with him; he seemed to want Billy's opinion and advice more than he had ever wanted them before in his life.

If Ma Roper knew that Shorty had been in jail and should, by the mandate of the court, be there still, she did not mention the fact or express any surprise or curiosity over his sudden appearance. If she wondered who Cole was and what was his business there, she kept her speculations to herself. She wanted to know all the gossip of Crater, however, and manifested a lively interest in the affairs of her neighbors. She seemed a garrulous old lady, and her bread was sour. Beyond that, Cole felt, when the meal was done, that he knew very little about Ma Roper and that he cared less. She was not in the least like Mother Harris, at any rate. He carried away from the house with him the impression that she bore no very good will toward the world in general and that she had no sympathy for the troubles of other folk, but how he got that impression he could not have told.

"We might as well bunk down and get some sleep," Shorty suggested when they had

left the house. "The dogs 'll likely wake us up if anybody comes. Stake yourself to a bed in there, Cole. This tent looks purty good to me."

Cole nodded and entered a cabin with three beds, and laid himself down on the cleanest, suddenly realizing that he was tired and sleepy, and that he was glad Roper was not at home. He wanted to think things out before he went any further, because he could see that the task he had set himself would not be so simple, after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SHORTY WANTS THE TRUTH

HOURS after that, Cole awoke, for the simple reason that a fly sat down upon his nose to whet its legs and wash its face — or whatever it is that flies do when they begin to prink and preen themselves. A swipe of his hand settled that performance and the fly decided to adjourn to the open air. On its way out, it met Shorty who was up and had come quietly to the doorway to make certain observations of his own.

"You 'sleep, Cole?" he asked cheerfully, seeing Cole lying there upon his side with one arm thrown over his face.

Cole was not, but he expected to be in about three minutes, and he did not want the interval prolonged by Shorty or any one else, so he gave no sign whatever that he heard. The ruse was successful. In a minute he heard Shorty walking away, and after a time of diminishing footsteps he heard the screen door slam, so he knew that Shorty had gone up to the house.

Cole lay still for a moment longer, trying to woo back the dream which the fly had interrupted. Instead, it seemed to him that the walls of the jail were closing inexorably around him; he felt stifled, shut in away from the outside world, trapped, somehow; and the next thing he knew he was sitting up on the edge of the bed, feeling for the gun he had taken from the sheriff's room.

Full consciousness came with the feel of the checked and embossed grip of the weapon, but reassurance failed to come with it. He still felt as if he were in a trap, and that if he meant to get out before the jaws closed upon him with a final snap, he had better be quick about it; a hang-over from his late captivity, no doubt, but the feeling was strong enough to send him to the window that looked down toward the stables.

No one was in sight anywhere. Eagle and the sheriff's horse dozed in the corral, and a white hen was walking up the ridge of a haystack just beyond. Cole watched her for a minute. Then he straddled out over the window sill and went down there. Just why he should keep the cabin between himself and the house he did not explain, but since he had

no definite suspicion of Shorty, he probably wanted merely to make sure of being left to himself. He was not sleepy after all, he discovered, but he still wanted to be left alone so that he could think.

The haystack offered itself to him as a most attractive retreat, and he made for it directly, without even the dogs' interference. The white hen had settled herself in some deep nest on the peak and he did not even disturb her as he climbed up to where one end of the stack had been cut down to feed the stabled horses when Roper and his men were at home. The platform thus left at the end farthest from the house was perhaps six feet from the ground, and it was in the shade, moreover. Cole sank into a pile of loose hay with a deep sigh of content. Here, at least, he need not be on his guard, nor need he fear interruption to his thoughts.

But if he thought he was going to meditate deeply and wisely on the subject of John Roper he was mistaken, for straightway he began to think of that day when he pitched hay for Mother Harris; from there he began to think of Dorothy, and thinking of her he fell asleep again, while pleasantly engaged

in painting mental pictures among the clouds that drifted lazily overhead. So the youth of him dominated once more over the man of him, and the meaning hidden deep in the eyes of a girl held his thoughts from dwelling just then upon the trail of a murderer.

To a casual mind it may seem that Cole Lawson did a great deal of eavesdropping at one time or another during this period of his life. But even in the range land men do talk together when they meet, and — because their work is such that they must do most of their talking in the open air and frequently amidst the noise of the herds — their voices gain a carrying quality not found among city men, who speak more often in the immediate neighborhood of strangers. At any rate, Cole had unthinkingly planted himself in an excellent position for eavesdropping when Roper rode home and began to unsaddle his horse; which he did, after Cole had spent an hour or so asleep in the hay.

Shorty had evidently seen him approach and came down to meet him, or had been warned by the clamor of the dogs, for Cole heard voices and the barking of dogs almost simultaneously. Roper swore at the dogs and

they shut up at once. It was this which brought Cole to his senses and reminded him of the fact that he would be called upon now to use all the brains God had given him and all the courage as well. But before he made himself known to Roper he wanted to hear what these two would have to say to each other when no one else was by. He listened deliberately.

Roper was naturally astonished to see Shorty, and Shorty made short work of his escape. That part did not greatly interest Cole, though the next sentence did.

"I brought along the fellow that shot Steve," said Shorty. "No, listen, John. He's in the cabin poundin' his ear, and I want to talk to you. There's some damn' funny work goin' on, up there at Crater, and I hit off down here to put you wise."

"And put Saunders on your trail down here," Roper said nastily. "If he comes here after yuh, Shorty, I'll turn yuh over to him. I ain't goin' to get in bad with the sheriff's office, for you or no one else."

"Well, now, maybe you'll change your mind about that, John, when I tell yuh. A C Bar L man come over to Crater day before

yesterday, claimin' to be a deputy sheriff. Maybe he is. He come to claim them horses Cole's got, or did have ——"

"I know all about that, and all the how and whyfor," Roper again interrupted. "Dirk's just come back from over there. Seems young Lawson had them horses stole from him. He's in Seattle ——"

"Like hell he's in Seattle! This feller I got with me is him. I knew it, the minute that C Bar L man stepped up to the door and looked at him. Went off down the hall together, thick as thieves. They're cookin' up something, John. They're wise."

"Wise to what?" Roper's tone was a challenge. "If they're wise to anything, I know who to thank for it, Shorty. You put your foot it in when you done what you done ——"

"Hell, blame *me,* will yuh?" Defiance and contempt vibrated in the voice of Shorty McGuire. "You sent me over there to shut old Lawson's mouth, and I *shut* it, damn yuh! Now, you ——"

"Now, you should have stayed right there in jail. It was the safest place in the country for yuh."

"Oh, was it? Not with that fellow I met

that day, over here hobnobbin' with Saunders — and not with this damn' kid bonin' me about the horse I rode over there. They're cookin' up somethin', I tell yuh."

"What?"

"That's what I aim to find out," said Shorty with cold malevolence.

"Think this kid knows anything about it? Looks to me, Shorty, as if you kinda went off half-cocked. Dirk read the letter young Lawson wrote back from Seattle, describin' this feller over here. Dirk knows the Coast, and he said it's a dead cinch this feller stole young Lawson's horses and outfit and put off over here. If they sent a man over here after 'em, that only bears out what Dirk says. He read the letter, mind yuh, and the description. He knows what boat young Lawson was takin' north. You can ask him if yuh like, soon as he comes up from the Sinks. Bart had it all wrong ——"

"In that case," said Shorty grimly, "it's about time I come and put yuh all wise. It's a frame-up, I tell yuh. Hell, I've been watchin' this kid, and I *know*. Why, he described my horse to the last hair in his tail. Dirk's a damn' fool, that's all."

"If you mean that sorrel horse you got off me, you've rode him considerable, Shorty. Black Rim ain't the only place you rode him — but that was one place, you damn' fool, where you should 've rode a horse that wouldn't be spotted as yours first thing. You got the jumps, looks to me." Roper gave a laugh that was in itself an affront to any self-respecting man. "We had this kid lined up wrong. He stole them horses off young Cole Lawson, I tell yuh. His showin' up at the Muleshoe was just a bad break — or else he aimed to let on like he was Lawson, an' got cold feet afterwards. Bart put me on the wrong trail. Now, here you come, like a — damn' fool, gettin' us all in bad with Saunders. Or yuh would, if I'd let yuh. What you better do, Shorty, is go on back to jail and take the kid with yuh."

"Yes, I will — *not!* I tell yuh, he's Cole Lawson! Gimme half an hour with 'im, and I'll prove it to yuh."

This apparently impressed Roper, for there was a pause before he answered. Cole was afraid to look, lest he rattle the hay and betray his position, but he listened, holding his breath that he might not lose a word.

"How d' you expect to prove it, Shorty?" Roper asked at last.

"I'll string the damn' traitor up by the thumbs and make him come clean," Shorty said, a hideous expectance in his tone. "What 'n hell d' yuh think I brought him along for? I couldn't go at him in jail, could I? I'll get it all out of him, or I'll skin 'im as I would a coyote."

"If he ain't young Lawson ——" Roper was cautious, weighing all possibilities.

"If he ain't," Shorty impatiently pointed out, "nobody's goin' to miss him; a horse thief that's broke jail is better off dead, anyhow. If he is — and I know damn' well he is — I'll kill the — for tryin' to run a rannigan on me."

"You'll pull the roof down on your head, Shorty. There's times for that, and other times — like old Cole, now. You ——"

"Yeah, I what?"

"You took a risk you wasn't justified in takin'. Dirk says there ain't a whisper of doubt; but there might 've been. Dirk says we're all in the clear over there, and we can just as well ferget it and go on about our own business. *You're* the one that's liable to ——"

"Cut out the compliments, John. I'm the

one that *knows*. And while we're on the subject, John, don't get the idea that I'm goin' to give you a chance to bump *me* off. I thought that all over on the way down here. I don't trust yuh a damned inch, if you want to know how I feel. But this is your funeral as much as it's mine, you want to remember. You goin' along to help me git the truth outa that kid, or ain't yuh?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

COLE SETTLES IT

"YOU don't need any help! Put up your hands, both of you!" Suddenly exploding into a fury that startled even himself, Cole came off the stack and faced them, gun in hand and finger trembling on the trigger. "I'm Cole Lawson, all right, if that's what's worrying you, Shorty. You — you snake!"

This, because Shorty's hand had darted toward the gun hanging in its holster. Cole fired, and the hand jerked upward, scattering red drops that became a small stream.

"You too, Roper. Get your hands up, or ——"

Roper's hands went up, but he whistled and the dogs came bounding down from the house, barking and yelping with what sounded to Cole like savage anticipation. Shorty was reaching for his gun with his left hand. Cole stopped that with grim completeness and snatched the gun from its holster as the foremost dog came up.

"Call off your dogs, Roper, or I'll have to

kill 'em," he yelled. "I don't want to — they're more human than you are. Quick!"

Roper gave him one evil glance, looked at Shorty who was staggering away with one shattered hand and a broken arm, and hesitated. Already the leader of the pack was standing ready, teeth bared and hair lifted on neck and shoulders, waiting to leap. A dog more or less — what did it matter? It would give him a chance——

"Git 'im, Wolf!" snarled Roper, and the dog sprang.

So did Cole, for that matter, and dodged the impact of the big brute's body as he fired point-blank at Roper, who already had his gun out. Roper took two jerky steps backward and went down; the sheriff's guns were good ones, thought Cole, as he whirled to defend himself from the pack.

It was not pretty work, that. Cole loved dogs. But these were savage beasts, taught to kill when their master commanded, and now that master was down and frenziedly urging them on — to their death, as he must have known; for it was Cole's life or the dogs'.

More than once he felt their hot breath in

his face as they leaped for his throat and fell back. More than once their fangs sliced into his flesh and came away with fragments of cloth which they flung aside.

"You — you ought to be shot, yourself!" blazed Cole, with tears of excitement and rage in his voice, when it was over and Roper was left cursing impotently on the ground. "You could 've stopped them! You ——"

"For pity's sake, what *is* this — a slaughter yard? Why, Cole!" Mother Harris and Dorothy, having started for Crater that morning early, decided to stop at John Roper's ranch on the way, and see if they could learn anything about Steve and what he was doing; or perhaps they might even be able to pick up a little information of use to Sheriff Saunders, who had told them a most amazing story about Cole.

They had driven up in the midst of the tumult of howling and barking and worrying, with men's voices shouting unintelligible curses, punctuated by the vicious crack of gun shots. Just as soon as Dorothy could tie old Joe, who would not "stand," they had come running around the end of the stable to see what dreadful things were happening.

They saw Cole standing threateningly beside Roper, who was half lying on the ground and looking sick. Dogs seemed to be lying about promiscuously, and Cole's shirt was half torn off him and his arms were all bloody, and his face was convulsed with rage and pain. He turned his head and stared at them as if he had never seen them before in his life.

"Where's Shorty? See anything of Shorty McGuire? I can't let *him* get away, the——"

"Why, are you thinking of killing him, too?" Dorothy had recovered her voice, while her mother was still gasping in speechless astonishment.

Her voice brought Cole to his senses. He started toward them, walking groggily, his gun hanging loosely in his hand and breathing faint wisps of smoke.

"Shorty—I've got to find Shorty——" He halted, looking dully around him and swaying a little as he stood. "He—he mustn't get to the rest——"

"Mustn't get to John Roper's men, you mean?" Dorothy was walking slowly toward him, her hands out as if she feared he would

fall and she must catch him. "Some riders were coming down off the hill as we drove up. I guess it's the AJ boys, all right."

"Then get back, outa the way!" Cole straightened, looked around him, and as if he had chosen his position, began to back toward the haystack. "Get away from here!" he exclaimed, waving the two women off. "There'll be bullets bouncin' around here when they come!"

"Oh, is that so! If that's the case, I guess I can bounce a few myself! Come on, Mom, you've got dad's gun — I know, 'cause I saw you slip it into your coat pocket. Billy the Kid's going to need help, from the looks of things around here." Dorothy, walking wide of Roper and the dogs, planted herself beside Cole. "You certainly got yourself well chewed up, didn't you?" she observed, glancing hastily at Cole. "You look almost as if you'd been in a fight!"

"Dorothy, how can you pester the poor boy that way?" her mother sharply reproved her, and ranged herself belligerently alongside Cole. "Here the poor boy's been fightin' for his very life, and you ——"

"Shut up, Mom. They're coming," was

the unfilial retort, as hoof beats were heard galloping up to the stable.

"You two beat it!" Cole implored. "This is going to be ——"

"Oh, hush!" Dorothy hissed. "They won't shoot us if they can help it. What do you think they are, anyway?"

Cole did not say, for at that moment Sheriff Saunders himself walked around the corner of the stable, followed closely by Billy Parrish. They stared, and Billy came on to Cole. Dorothy gave a hysterical little laugh. Mother Harris looked suddenly wilted and as if she were going to cry.

"You want to look out, Mr. Saunders," Cole cried, his voice showing the strain he had borne. "Shorty's somewhere — gone to stir up the gang, I guess. He can't shoot — I put him on the bum; but he can walk, all right, and he'll have the gang here if he can find them ——"

"That's all right, kid," Saunders rumbled equably. "I want the gang here; save goin' after 'em."

"But ——"

"Now, that's all right! I got men enough to take care of 'em; don't you worry a

minute. Well, Mr. Roper, I guess you and Cole's been havin' a little trouble here. Where yuh seem to be hurt?"

As easily as that, the storm of killing hate subsided. The two women and Billy Parrish led Cole off to the well where first aid could be most conveniently applied. He was terribly bitten on arms and legs, and Mother Harris had visions of hydrophobia which she would not have admitted for the world.

Ed Carroll and his men, Billy explained later on, were stationed where they could pick up Roper's men when they rode in, and some one had found Shorty half a mile down the trail to the Sinks and had brought him back before he could give any harmful warning to the rest.

"Cole better go right on up to Crater with us," Mother Harris declared, "and take the train to Salt Lake or somewhere, where he can have these bites Pasteurized. Don't you think so, Mr. Saunders?"

Mr. Saunders did, and so did Carroll and Billy, when they heard the plan. There was no knowing, they said, how long they might be delayed there waiting for Roper's men to come in, and Cole had better go on and have

his wounds attended to before they gave him trouble.

Billy went along and drove the team, which gave Cole and Dorothy a chance to get really acquainted in the back seat together; though Cole was not in the mood for much talk. Still, certain matters of interest to them both progressed very favorably and they parted friends at the depot.

You may think that Cole returned to the Black Rim when his hurts were healed — or before — and resumed his place among those friends who had known him all his life. That was what Billy Parrish expected and blandly took for granted, especially when it developed that some money was left after the Lawson debts were paid from the sheriff's sale. But Cole had different plans, and at Crater he balked and would not take his horses and go on home with Billy.

"Saunders has got things fixed so I don't have to go back to jail, but I can't go home yet. I've got some stuff out at the Harris place," Cole explained. "I'll have to ——"

"Aw, cut it out, Cole. Saunders had your stuff brought in here; you know darn well the

women hauled it in the day you had your big setting with Roper and his dogs. And your horses are here, and your saddle ——"

"I've got a dog out there I'd hate to leave ——"

"Aw, the world's full of dogs, Cole. You surely ain't going to be pestered with a dog? Anyway, there's an ornery yella curb-setter that followed Saunders and me in, when we brought the horses. Mrs. Harris said he was yours, so ——"

"Well, Billy, I've got to go out there anyway. I promised Mommie I'd help her run the ranch. And if there's any money coming to me, Bill, right there's where it's going to be used. I've got my eye on a dandy piece of ground right on a creek ——"

"Aw, come off!" Billy disgustedly implored. "You got your eye on the girl, that's what."

Cole's ears turned a sudden and vivid scarlet, but he stood his ground.

"Well, and who's business would that be?" he demanded truculently.

"Why, nobody's, Cole, and I wish you luck. Only, don't lie to *me,* darn yuh!"

THE END

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